Things Are Disappearing . . .

Quietly, Lerner pulled out Fip’s ink bottle and put her head down on the desk so that she could stare eye to eye with him.

She tried to think through what she knew and what she didn’t know about this little creature. He ate the words *spinach soufflé* and *spinach soufflé* disappeared, but not spinach. If he had just eaten the word *spinach*, would all spinach have disappeared? She smiled at the thought, then a little shiver crawled up her spine. Could the magic be that far-reaching? If Fip had eaten the word *stars* instead of *Jay’s Star*, would all the stars in the world have disappeared? Lerner tried to imagine a sky without stars. If the magic was that strong, she’d have to be very careful about what she let him eat.

**Arizona Young Readers’ Award**
**Georgia Children’s Book Award Nominee**
**Indiana Young Hoosier Book Award Nominee**
**Minnesota Maud Hart Lovelace Award Master List**
**New Mexico Land of Enchantment Book Award Master List**
**Sunshine State Young Reader’s Award Reading List**
**Washington Sasquatch Reading Award Nominee**
The Word Eater

Mary Amato

Spot illustrations by Christopher Ryniak

Holiday House / New York
The words hung in the air like a black cloud.
Lerner grabbed a piece of paper. If Fip could take the
Attacka out of Attackaterrers, he could take the meanness
out of Mr. Nitz. She wrote in tiny letters: Mr. Robert Nitz’s
meanness toward Bobby.
Last night, she had promised herself no more risky ex-
periments, but this one felt right.
Fip was hungry, and the tiny letters went down quickly.
Lerner looked out her window.
“Look at me when I’m talking to you,” Mr. Nitz said.
Bobby looked up. Mr. Nitz froze and then shivered, as
if an invisible creature had scurried up his spine. His neck
lengthened and then his whole body relaxed. He shook his
head, confused. “I don’t know what got out of me. I mean,
what got into me.”
Bobby’s chest tightened. Warily, he looked at his father,
waiting for another insult to fly.
Mr. Nitz looked back at him with clear eyes. “I feel a little
funny. Funny in a good way. How about you?”
“How about me?”
“Yes.”
“You’re asking me how I feel?” Bobby squinted up at his
dad.
Mr. Nitz shrugged, smiling. “Seems like a simple enough
question.”
“It’s just that you don’t usually say stuff like that.”
“I don’t? Well, old dogs can learn new tricks.” He sat
down next to Bobby on the steps. “We were talking about Ripper, weren’t we?”

The tightness in Bobby’s chest moved to his throat. Why wasn’t his father yelling at him? “You won’t believe me. But I swear I didn’t let Ripper out.”

Behind the curtain in her room, Lerner winced. Bobby was going to tell his dad that it was her fault. She closed her eyes and waited to hear him blurt it out.

“Maybe it isn’t anybody’s fault,” Bobby said. “Maybe Ripper just got out.”

Lerner opened her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. Bobby Nitz was not a tattler.

“Maybe you’re right,” Mr. Nitz said.

Bobby looked up, surprised that his father was agreeing. He caught sight of Lerner in her window.

She ducked behind the curtain. Inside her room, she gazed down at the magical little worm in her hand. “Go, Fip!”

Fip could sense an incredible energy vibrating from Lerner’s entire being. This was more like it. All the tension of yesterday melted away, and Fip skinned around on her palm with joy.

Later on in the day, the Nitzes came over to talk about the “school situation,” as Mr. Chanse said. Lerner didn’t stare at Mr. Nitz, although she wanted to. She could tell he’d changed, though, in a matter of minutes. There was a bright, pleasant atmosphere in the room, even though they were gathered to talk about serious school problems. And Mrs. Nitz kept looking over at her husband with the same expression you see on people’s faces when they open their doors in the spring and discover that all their daffodils have bloomed.

Mr. Chanse cleared his throat. “Well, I have to say I’m confused. It sounds like we’ve got a big mess here. I’m sure that one person isn’t to blame for everything. I think we’ll be able to sort it out if you each accept the blame for whatever mistakes you made.”

Lerner nodded. She knew it was pointless to tell the truth. Parents preferred simple apologies. “I took a dare that would have gotten Bobby into trouble. And I stole candy bars and quarters from a vending machine. And I was really the one responsible for getting rid of Mr. Droan’s tests. . . .” She hoped they wouldn’t ask how. “And I can’t really say what happened to Ripper, but I wished he would disappear.” She stopped.

Bobby cleared his throat, and everybody looked at him. He was sitting on the edge of a cushioned footstool, jiggling his feet, one on top of the other. “I did a lot of wrong things,” Bobby said.

There was a long, awkward silence. Lerner held her breath. He didn’t sound the way he sounded when he was talking back to Mr. Droan or Ms. Findley.

“I hate it,” he finally said and looked up. “I hate it.”
“Hate what?” Mr. Chanse asked.

“School. The MPOOE Club. Everyone in it.” His words were like the red-hot coil of an electric broiler, and the truth of his hatred radiated out like heat.

The grown-ups shifted back a little in their seats. It wasn’t exactly a detailed confession, but the emotion underlying what he said was so big that they didn’t want to push it any further.

“Well then,” Mrs. Chanse said. Everybody stood up.

The Chanses grounded Lerner, made her apologize to Bobby, gave her extra chores to pay for the candy bars, and told her that she had to write letters of apology to Mr. Droan and to the owner of the vending machine (returning the money as well).

Mr. Nitz grounded Bobby and told him to apologize to Lerner. Then Mrs. Chanse invited them for a potluck a week from Monday. “I had no idea the Nitzes were so nice!” she said as she closed the door.

In private, both Lerner and Bobby got long lectures from their parents about how they couldn’t let the MPOOEs bother them and how they had to do the right thing no matter what kind of peer pressure they were up against. Lerner and Bobby both nodded through the lectures, knowing that it wasn’t as simple as their parents made it sound.

That night, just as Lerner was falling asleep, she heard a thump against her window. She looked over and saw something sticking to the glass. A paper airplane with a suction cup ingeniously attached to the tip. She raised her window and peeled it off. There was a message inside.
Dr. William Jay  
Figer National Observatory  
Astronomy Lab  
Tucson, AZ 78734

Avalanche Woman  
c/o Mountain View Convalescent Center  
Anchorage, Alaska

Dear Ms. Avalanche:

I’m sorry I cannot address you by your name. I don’t know it. I have read about your extraordinary case. I’m writing in the hopes that you can help me. Last week, I lost the power of speech from a shock. Perhaps you read about me in the newspaper? I feel words in my throat like prickle of light in the dark sky, but when I open my mouth nothing comes out.

I read that your recovery is complete and had something to do with spinach soufflé? Please come to Tucson at my expense and help me. I have this feeling that we are connected.

Yours truly,  
William Jay
Late morning sun streamed through Lerner’s bedroom window, spreading out on her yellow quilt like butter on top of French toast. She was sitting up in bed, still in her pajamas, still under the covers, with a pad of paper resting on her knees. She had been trying to do some science homework, like she was supposed to, but she had set her textbook down and given herself an assignment of another kind. In the form of a table, she was writing an analysis of Fip food, sorting out the good from the bad, the known from the unknown. Feeding Fip was complicated. If she was going to continue giving him words, then she had to thoroughly analyze the situation and come up with a plan.
One good, four very bads, and four don't knows. Not exactly a great record. Lerner wasn’t sure what to do next. She needed time to find some answers, but, unfortunately, Fip needed food. She took Fip out of his bottle and sat on her bed. The worm looked up at her hopefully. She could see his facial features quite well now. He had grown a dark, rosy brown and was about the length of a large paper clip. One week and he had quadrupled in size!

“Maybe you could learn to eat dirt for a little while,” she said. “Just until I get a few things straightened out in my mind.” She pinched a bit of dirt from her ivy plant onto a shoe box lid and put Fip in the middle of it. She set it on her bed and lay down next to it. “Just relax and try it,” she said, and closed her eyes. “Worms like dirt.” She’d relax, too, and let Fip be a regular worm for a minute or two.

Lerner’s quilt was toastily soft. She snuggled her head in the crook of her arm and fell asleep.

Fip sniffed at the dirt for a while, trying to work up an appetite. But he finally gave up and skinched off the lid to search for something tastier. He wriggled until he came to a book open at the foot of the bed. Now this was more like it. He climbed on, found an ummy word, and began to chew.

Lerner’s eyelids drifted open. She lifted her head and glanced at the shoe box lid. “Fip?”

Her heart started pounding. She scanned the bedspread and saw her science book open at the bottom of the bed.

Lerner grabbed the book, open to an illustration of photosynthesis. There! There was Fip inching up to the letters e and n. The beginning of the word was already gone. Lerner’s brain started racing to the boom of her heart. What is it that plants give off?

_Oxygen!_ Lerner thought. Fip is eating oxygen! Oxy and _g_ were gone. “Fip! You can’t do that! You could get us all killed.” She shook Fip in her fist and began pacing.

Fip shuddered, bouncing around in the cocoon of her hand. What was wrong? Lerner’s body was secreting her alarm chemical. Why was she flying around the room? Between two of her fingers, Fip saw the spinning world. The bottle on her desk was getting bigger and bigger. Fip curled into a ball, ready for impact. BAM! He hit the bottom of the bottle. SLAM! The lid crashed into place.

“You’re never eating again!” Lerner yelled. She backed
away and tried to calm down. Was the supply of oxygen in the air thinning? She grabbed her textbook and looked at the page. *Oxyg*. Did it mean anything? She ran into the family room, where her parents were finishing their morning coffee.

“*Oxyg*! DOES IT MEAN ANYTHING? WHERE’S THE DICTIONARY?” Lerner yelled in one breath because she didn’t want to waste any.

Her parents looked at each other.

Lerner grabbed the big black dictionary off her mother’s desk and batted the pages until she found the *oxys*.

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oxycephaly
  oxygen
  oxygenate
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No *oxyg* listed. *Oxyg* wasn’t a word representing a real thing, so Fip’s eating had no consequences. She closed her eyes and took a big breath of beautiful oxygen. When she opened her eyes, her parents were staring at her. “Never mind,” she said, and ran back upstairs.

The bottle shook as Lerner pounded into the room. Fip pressed his bristles against the glass. Lerner peered in.

“I’m sorry I was rough,” Lerner said. “You’re probably still hungry.” A solution popped into her head. What if she fed Fip nonsense words, such as *oxyg*. She ran to her desk and got out a pen and paper. Putting down one random letter after another, she wrote: Gurkengabel. It just might work. For the first time all day, she felt absolutely giddy. She ran into the family room. Her parents shut their mouths quickly and looked guilty, as if they’d been talking about her. She smiled innocently and hoisted the dictionary to her chest. “I’ve got to get one of these for myself,” she said, and ran back upstairs.

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gurgle
gurglet
Gurkha
gurnard
guru
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No Gurkengabel. Aha! No Gurkengabel. “Have a delicious Gurkengabel!” Lerner sang as she popped Fip out of his bottle. She set him on her notebook page right next to the letter G. “Sounds pretty good if I do say so myself. One Gurkengabel! Hold the Mustard!”

The little worm looked at the ink, then up at Lerner. She was acting strange and some of her alarm chemical lingered in the air. But he was starved. Before she could change her mind, Fip gobbled the *Gurkengabel*.

Bobby sat at the computer in his father’s den, without the usual fear of being caught flapping around inside his chest like a bat in a shoe box. Through the open door, the light
sound of his parents’ voices drifted in. Usually his parents didn’t talk at all. Most Sundays, his father worked in his office and his mother tiptoed around the house doing whatever it was that she did.

Even though he was grounded, he was having an amazing day. A lazy, ordinary, stay-at-home day. They had pancakes. And he spent the morning finishing the model bird skeleton that he had been building: wing bones—the humerus, radius, and ulna—just like his own arm bones, only light as paper. Every few minutes, he’d take a break and stick his head out the window to get a breath of fresh air. He’d look over at Lerner’s window and try to imagine what she was doing.

He logged onto the Internet and sat for a few seconds, his fingers resting on the keys. What should he search for? He didn’t know what she had fed Fip since yesterday. He typed in the key words: mystery and disappearance. One thousand and three matches. Too big to search. Tomorrow, he’d come right out and ask her all about Fip. But would Lerner really talk to him about it? Why should she trust him?

The thought of tomorrow weighed him down. Bobby had already decided that he wasn’t going to tattle on the MPOOEś. He was hoping that would gain him a little respect. But who was he fooling? Nothing would change. Tomorrow everybody would go on hating him. Including Lerner.
The substitute went on.
Randy whispered to Reba, “I bet they’re going to tell Norker that we put the tests in Bobby’s locker.”
“They can’t prove anything,” Reba said.
“I told you not to do it,” Sharmaine said, and Reba gave her a nasty look.

After ten minutes of work sheet time, the classroom door opened and in walked Bobby, Lerner, and Mrs. Norker with the stack of blank photosynthesis exams. Lerner and Bobby slid into their seats, and Mrs. Norker addressed the class.
“We’ve had some behavior problems here. Lerner and Bobby have taken responsibility for their actions and have been appropriately punished.”
Reba raised her hand. “What particular actions have Lerner and Bobby taken responsibility for?”
“None of your business, Reba.”
The room was silent.
“If they said anything negative about the MPOOE Club, I hope—”
“Reba, I don’t want to hear a word about the MPOOE Club. Enough is enough.”
Mrs. Norker delivered a lecture about good behavior and told them she didn’t expect to hear about any more problems. Then she passed out the exams and told them to get busy.
Reba whispered to Lerner, “You’d better not have blamed us for the tests.”
Lerner smiled. “SLUGs don't need to get other people in trouble to feel powerful. Only MPOOEIs do that.”

Sharmaine laughed.

Lerner looked around. The principal was right. “Enough is enough.” She ripped a piece of blank paper off the bottom of her exam and wrote:

Meeting at Recess. SLUGs ONLY. Pass it on.

She handed it to Sharmaine who read it and passed it on. Lerner watched as the note went from desk to desk. For the rest of the period, although they worked in silence, Lerner could feel a certain bond forming between the SLUGs. She didn't know if Sharmaine was a part of it, but Lerner and the rest of the SLUGs were being connected by an invisible thread.

At recess Lerner walked over to the big oak tree, which was where the MPOOEIs would often begin their powwows. After a moment, thirteen SLUGs ran over and surrounded Lerner. Bobby followed but kept quiet as the others began talking at once. The words we and us began bouncing around. What should we do about the MPOOEIs? The MPOOEIs are planning something really horrible against us now. The space under the tree suddenly felt like a stage with Lerner in the center under the exciting heat of spotlights.

“I have something very powerful that the MPOOEIs don't have,” Lerner said mysteriously.

Bobby’s face fell. “You're going to tell them?”

Lerner paused.

Winny looked at Bobby and then at Lerner. “Is he part of this?”

“He knows about it.”

The SLUGs digested this little tidbit of unbelievable news. Bobby Nitz, the lowest of the lowly, was in on something big.

“But is he . . . in?” Winny asked.

“He can’t be in. He’ll ruin everything,” Julio said.

“In what?” Lerner said. “What exactly is everybody talking about?” But she knew. A thing was forming, a club, centered around her, and this was her moral moment of truth. Was Bobby in or not? Without Bobby, she had a better chance of popularity. But was it fair to exclude Bobby because of his past behavior? What if he was changing? Did he deserve a chance?

“You can’t trust him,” another SLUG whispered. “He’s not really a SLUG.”

Bobby started to walk away.

“We’re not SLUGs, either!” Lerner said. “Just because the stupid MPOOEIs call us SLUGs doesn’t mean we are SLUGs. Bobby, wait.”

Bobby turned around.

Lerner set her backpack on the ground. “I have prin-
ciples. If I’m going to be part of a group then I don’t want it to be a snobbish clique. Anyone can be in this group who promises to keep a secret and agrees to use the power for good, not for evil.”

Everybody shut up. Bobby walked over and stood in the circle.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Bobby whispered.

Lerner did, too. She started telling them about Fip. Bobby filled in some of the missing blanks, things that Lerner didn’t know about, like the thumbtack incident and how he had found articles about the disappearances of thumbtacks, spinach soufflé, and the vending machine on the Internet. The first time he talked, everybody looked at each other as if they couldn’t believe they were listening to Bobby Nitz. But what he had to say was fascinating—especially to Lerner.

Everybody had a different idea about what to feed Fip next. Winny wanted to get rid of cigarettes, which she said her mother couldn’t stop buying, Julio wanted to get rid of poverty, and somebody wanted to get rid of guns.

“No, all those things are too big!” Lerner said.

“How about potholes?” Winny asked.

“You guys don’t get it,” Lerner said. “Even something as simple as potholes can be a problem. If we get rid of potholes, then the people who get paid to fix them will be out of a job.”

“Why don’t we concentrate on something right here at school?” Winny said.

“MPOOE!” Julio said.

“We absolutely can’t delete people,” Lerner said. “Besides, there are some people in the club who aren’t so bad.” She thought about Sharmaine.

“What if we deleted the MPOOE Club, not the people in it?” Winny suggested. There was a general hush.

“If we fed Fip the word MPOOEs, then the people would disappear, but if we fed him the words MPOOE Club, then the thing that holds them together would disappear. Right?” Bobby whispered.

Lerner wasn’t sure. They were silent for a while. “Maybe we should try it,” somebody whispered.

“We can’t rush into anything,” Lerner said. “Let’s have another meeting tomorrow to decide.”

The bell rang. Recess ended too soon. With smiles on their faces and secret knowledge in their minds, the SLUGs walked in past the MPOOEs on the basketball court.

Reba watched, biting her nails. The SLUGs were a force. How did that happen?

As soon as Lerner got home, she called up the Internet news and typed in the key word Gurkengabel. She expected to see “0 matches” on the screen; instead, an article appeared.
Oh great! Lerner couldn’t believe her rotten luck! She looked at Fip, who was asleep in his bottle. She didn’t know what she could safely feed him. His little tummy rose and fell as he snored away. He looked plump enough to get by without food today. She’d have to talk it over with the others and decide what to feed him tomorrow.