

Disney

ALEXANDER and the Terrible, Horrible, NO GOOD, VERY BAD DAY

BELOVED CHILDREN'S BOOK BY JUDITH VIORST INSPIRES BIG-SCREEN ADAPTATION

Author and Real-Life Alexander Who Inspired her Story Share Behind-the-Book Scoop

Beloved children's book "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day," published in 1972 by Atheneum, was written by Judith Viorst and illustrated by Ray Cruz. The endearing, enduring classic, which boasts more than 4 million copies in print, became an ALA Notable Children's Book while also winning a George G. Stone Center Recognition of Merit, a Georgia Children's Book Award, and distinction as a Reading Rainbow book. In 2010, the title was inducted into the Picture Book Hall-of-Fame.

Viorst confirms that the book was inspired by her own three sons' childhood misadventures—Anthony, Nicholas and, most notably, her youngest, Alexander. The book's success spawned two sequels: "Alexander, Who Used to be Rich Last Sunday" (1978) and "Alexander, Who's Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move" (1995). The 1972 original, which has never before been the subject of a feature film, was adapted to the small screen as a half-hour HBO animated musical in 1990. Viorst collaborated with composers Charles Strouse (music) and Shelley Markham (musical score) on a 1998 stage musical at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. The book also lives on in the audio arena, with the quintessential reading recorded on tape by actress Blythe Danner in 1984.

"My son, Alexander, had more than his share of bad days growing up," says 83-year-old author Viorst in recalling the inspiration for her first "Alexander" story more than four decades ago. "I mean, all kids trip, fall, bleed, get mad," she says. "He seemed to do it more often than most kids. He came limping home one day from preschool, having fallen off a chair during story time resulting in a knee injury. He's the only person I've ever met who could get injured by wiggling so much during story time—not playing soccer. Story time! That's my Alexander."

The mother-turned-author decided the little boy's exploits would not only inspire a great story, but might help remedy his many injuries. "I thought a funny book about a kid having a bad time would cheer him up," she says. "It didn't. He said, 'Why are you giving me this

bad day? Why don't you give it to Nick? Why don't you give it to Tony? Why me?' He got absolutely outraged."

Looking back on that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad moment from his early childhood, the all-grown-up Alexander, now 46 and a father of three himself, admits he wasn't pleased with his mother's story, till he realized the benefits he could reap from his notoriety (or infamy) in both grade school and high school.

"My mom told me that this Alexander character was based on me," the author's son, now a Virginia-based banker, recalls. "I didn't think I was like that at all as a child. But I remember we were up in her office when she first read it to me. I was angry. I wondered why I was associated with this story and book."

His mother says she offered to change the character's name. "As mothers do in their most manipulative way, I said, 'But then your name wouldn't be in great big letters on the front of the book,'" she recalls telling her son. "He stuck out his lower lip and said, 'Keep it Alexander.' By the time it came out and kids started to like it, talking about their bad days in connection with having this book read, he started feeling like I hadn't given him a bad day after all."

"I was sold," Viorst's son confirms. And, as time went by, the youngest of Viorst's three boys found ways to take advantage of it. "I got to pick a book in library time in grade school," he says. "There were eight books that were in regular rotation and this was definitely one of them. When I went to high school, it impressed the young ladies. It's served me very well and has been sort of a great ally in my life."

While Viorst's intention with the book was simply to cheer up her 5-year-old, she also set out to illustrate to children the world over that bad days happen. "They happen to good people," she says. "They happen all the time. That's the gist of the book. You're going to have good days and bad days—it's all part of the package. You don't get seven great days in a row. There's going to be a few bad days mixed in there."

"Everybody has a bad day and because it's a bad day, it has limits," Viorst continues. "It has a beginning and an end. There's a container concept to it in that maybe tomorrow will be better. So, I would hope that people would feel that they are going to have a better day coming up."

After years of talk that the book would make a great family film, Viorst encountered her own very good day when she found out a live-action movie inspired by her book was finally in the works. "It's so amazing that there's going to be actual people embodying these characters," she says. "There's going to be an actual Alexander living this story! "

In theaters Oct. 10, 2014, Disney's "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" follows 11-year-old Alexander (Ed Oxenbould) as he experiences the most terrible and horrible day of his young life—and soon learns that he's not alone when his mom (Jennifer Garner), dad (Steve Carell), brother (Dylan Minnette) and sister (Kerris Dorsey) all find themselves living through their own terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.