



Stoner

&  
Spaz

**RON KOERTGE**

SINCE I'VE BEEN pretty much treading water all day, the marquee of the Rialto Theatre looks like the prow of a ship coming to save me.

I limp past the cleaners, the paint store, City Scapes Furniture. I step up to the ticket booth. A real one. Out in front where it's supposed to be, not buried in some mall next to a Foot Locker.

And inside sits Mrs. Stenzgarden. Her dress has flowers on it. She single-handedly keeps the rouge trade alive. She wears huge earrings like starbursts.

"Hello, Benjamin." Her finger hovers over the red button. "One?"

“Since it’s Monster Week, do I get a discount?”

She glances up from the horoscope magazine she’s been reading. “I don’t think I understand, dear.”

“Just a little joke, Mrs. Stenzgarden. Forget it.”

“How’s your grandmother?”

“She’s fine. I’ll tell her you said hello.”

“Tell her I said hello.”

Right.

Ticket in hand, I make my way past the posters for Coming Attractions, lit top and bottom by dusty, flickering bulbs.

It rained this morning, so I’m extra careful, but looking down at the tiles that lead to the big double doors isn’t exactly a hardship. They are a very cool turquoise and black. My grandmother walked on these tiles when she was a kid. In fact, she’s on a committee that wants to preserve things like this theater, that red box office, these tiles before another mini-mall moves in selling acrylic nails, kung fu, and discount vitamins.

Inside, the lobby of the Rialto Theatre smells like butter from the Paleozoic, and so does



Reginald: ticket taker, popcorn maker, projectionist, owner, and manager. Reginald of the world's most awful comb-over, Reginald of the bad teeth and worse breath.

"Hey, Ben. Not a bad crowd, huh?"

"I dub thee Reginald the Optimist. Now rise, go forth into the land, and promote positive thinking for your king."

Reginald grins, showing me what looks like part of the keyboard of a tiny, decaying piano.

Maybe ten patrons lean against the wall or sink into the red, once-plush couch. I know most of them by sight. They're people who don't own a VCR and don't want to. Or if they do own one can't get it out of its box. Misfits and Luddites. Castaways and exiles. And all of us alone. Whoever said no man is an island has never been to the Rialto on a Friday night. And I can't help but wonder if I'll be here in ten, twenty, or thirty years, dragging my foot down that street I've lived on all my life toward another movie I've seen before. Thoughts like that can drive a man to drink.

I, on the other hand, buy a Dr Pepper from the Goth who works the concession stand. She

For sixteen-year-old Ben Bancroft—a kid with cerebral palsy, no parents, and an overprotective grandmother—the closest thing to happiness is hunkering alone in the back of the Rialto Theatre, watching *Bride of Frankenstein* for the umpteenth time. Of course, the *last* thing he wants is to run into someone like drugged-out Colleen Minou, resplendent in ripped tights, neon miniskirt, and an impressive array of tattoos. But when Colleen climbs into the seat beside him and rests a woozy head on his shoulder, Ben has that unmistakable feeling that his life is about to change.

**A PEN Literary Award Winner**

**An American Library Association  
Best Book for Young Adults**

**An American Library Association Quick Pick**

**A *Booklist* Editors' Choice**

**A *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*  
Blue Ribbon Winner**

**A *Publishers Weekly* Best Children's  
Book of the Year**

*Cover photograph copyright © 2002  
by Ricardo Pontes*

Age 14 and up  
0204



**CANDLEWICK PRESS**  
www.candlewick.com

U.S. \$6.99 / \$8.00 CAN

ISBN 978-0-7636-2150-6



9 780763 621506 5 0699 >

EAN

