

Now you
see it, now
you don't

The Word Eater

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with illustrations by
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Bookworm's Desk Calendar

Monday
1
October

"Worms and slugs and beetley bugs. You
don't know what's good for you."

—Roald Dahl

George's Marvelous Medicine

A yellowish cocoon, about the size of a corn kernel, twitched and rolled in the mud. A fat worm sucking up leaf mold felt the cocoon's vibrations through the mud and stopped eating. Quickly, she drummed a message through the ground to the others. *A Birth! A Birth!* Within seconds, 253

worms—the whole Lumbricus Clan—squirmed out of their tunnels and gathered into a circle around the cocoon with their leader, the Great Lumbra.

Finally the jerking stopped, and a baby worm, as small as a grain of rice, poked his head out of the cocoon into the moist October air. He blinked and looked at the worms gathered around him.

Worms are very sensitive creatures, and right away, this little newborn sensed that he was different. He blinked again. He had eyes, for one. The worms around him were eyeless, yet they seemed to be looking right at him.

“Why hasn’t he jumped out?” a worm whispered.

“Is something wrong with him?” asked another.

“Could be a Nothing Birth,” the Great Lumbra said in a gritty, ominous voice.

The little worm snapped to attention. They were waiting for him to jump out of his cocoon! Eager to make a good impression, he summoned up his strength, squeezed his eyes shut, and jumped. He imagined soaring out, turning a somersault in midair, and landing in the center of the clan’s circle. Instead, he slid down the side of the cocoon and plopped headfirst in the mud.

The worms gasped.

The Great Lumbra frowned and shook her fat

head. "The vibration is runtly and weakish! He won't pass the tests."

The sound of the Great Lumbra's voice made the baby worm's skin prickle with dread. He didn't know what she was talking about, but it didn't sound good.

One hundred yards from the ditch where the Lumbricus Glan lived, a girl named Lerner Chanse was sitting on a swing. Her skin was prickling with dread, too, from the sound of another voice: the voice of Reba Silo, the queen of the MPOOE Club.

"The only way you can get into the MPOOE Club is to pass a dare," Reba was telling her. "We thought up a good one for you. Actually, *I* thought it up. *I rule* when it comes to dares."

The two girls were sitting on rusty swings at the bottom of the Cleveland Park Middle School playground. All the other sixth graders were up on the blacktop next to the school pretending to have lunchtime recess while secretly watching the newcomer and the queen.

"Here's what you have to do," Reba continued. "Steal Mr. Droan's grade book, change Bobby Nitz's grade from D to A, and return it to Mr. Droan! Isn't that excellent?"

It didn't sound excellent to Lerner. "I don't get it," she said. "Nobody likes Bobby. Why do you want me to make his grade better?"

Gone!

Lerner Chanse is miserable at her new school, where the MPOOE (Most Powerful Ones On Earth) club lords it over the rest of her sixth-grade class, the SLUGs (Sorry Losers Under Ground). Afraid that she is destined to be a SLUG, Lerner wishes that everything would simply disappear. But things like that never happen—or do they?

Sometimes they do. The magic begins when Lerner happens upon a worm that eats printed words instead of dirt. If Fip eats a word, that item disappears from the world—*completely*. So she sets Fip onto the school cafeteria menu and soon rids the world of some pretty disgusting food, such as the frightening spinach soufflé.

But now Lerner has some big decisions to make. Should she rid the world of crime? Or bullying? Wipe her school off the map? Or will destroying anything cause problems she can't predict?

Lerner begins to discover that with extraordinary power comes extraordinary responsibility, but will she learn her lesson too late?

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