

Funny Frank



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This cheery twist on the ugly duckling story finds a barnyard chick named Frank longing to be a duck. From the moment he's hatched, Frank spends all his time at the edge of the pond. "Chickens can't swim," his worried mother tells him, but he tries anyway with near-disastrous results. Frank is rescued by the farmer's daughter who, with the help of her veterinarian uncle and dressmaker mother, devises a little wet suit for him out of an old hot-water bottle and makes flippers from rubber gloves. Frank quickly becomes not only a speed demon on the pond, out-swimming his web-footed pals, but also a hero when he saves his mother from a fox. Nevertheless full happiness eludes him ("He was after all a chicken at heart"), and when a speckled pullet named Gorgeous catches his eye, he finally learns to embrace life on land. Thoroughly engaging, this story trips along in typically breezy King-Smith (Babe the Gallant Pig) fashion, deftly flipping perspectives between that of the anthropomorphized barnyard animals and the human characters. Chipper dialogue, generous helpings of humor and a lickety-split plot add up to an amusing chapter book. Final artwork not seen by PW. Ages 7-10.

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Grades 2-4--An amusing chapter book about a chick that wants to be a duck. Eight-year-old Jemima notices Frank's fascination with the ducks and, with assistance from her parents and uncle, tries to help him learn to swim. A wet suit made from a hot-water bottle allows the chick to float, but he still can't glide across the pond like the ducks. Later, however, some chick-sized flippers give him serious speed in the water. Accepted at last by his new friends, Frank returns to his true nature, but not before befuddling a fox and saving his Mum. King-Smith's easygoing narrative makes this a pleasant variation of "The Ugly Duckling." Though the notion of a swimming chick has slapstick potential, the author builds the humor gently, without resorting to caricature. Jemima approaches her trial-and-error attempts to help her chick with logic and earnestness. Frank is the hero of the story, but seeing him through the humans' eyes, and through the eyes of his embarrassed mother, shows how others in the farmyard community regard his antics. Simple black-and-white illustrations appear on most pages, neatly matching the restrained fun of the words. Fairly short chapters and an easy-to-follow plot make this a fine choice for early chapter-book readers.

Steven Engelfried, Beaverton City Library, OR

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Gr. 3-5. The prolific King-Smith returns to the farm, but instead of focusing on pigs like Babe, King-Smith has a new hero, a baby chick named Frank--who wants to be a duck. From the first, Frank's mother, Gertrude, knows there's something amiss; Frank spends too much time looking longingly at the pond. When Frank makes clear his desire to swim, the ducklings laugh, but young Jemima, the farmer's daughter, intuitively understands what he wants. Rather than crush Frank's dream, Jemima and her mother make Frank a wet suit out of a hot-water bottle and webbed feet out of rubber gloves. He becomes an impressive swimmer, but when he falls in love, he finds that his outfit gets in the way. Although this is not in the upper echelon of King-Smith's work, it's a jolly tale that readers will enjoy all the more thanks to the jaunty pen-and-ink drawings. A little more sophisticated than a beginning reader, this is a good transition to middle-grade fiction. Ilene Cooper

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