

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Winner of the Readers' Choice Award and a Children's Literature Finalist –
20th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

READERS' CHOICE AWARD SPONSORED BY PIONEER PRESS AND TWINCITIES.COM

***Farmer Cap* by Jill Kalz, illustrated by Sahin Erkocak**

Picture Window Books

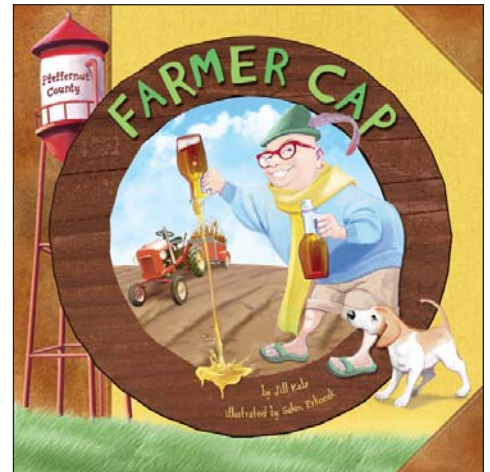
Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

SUMMARY:

Farmer Cap, short for “Casper,” plants unusual crops like spaghetti and popsicles. The other farmers laugh at him, but a spectacular harvest causes them to rethink their traditional views. *Farmer Cap* is the fourth book in the Pfeffernut County series.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. The word “strange” is used to describe Farmer Cap. Do you think this is an accurate description of the farmer? How do you define what makes a person strange?
3. What words do you think best describe Farmer Cap?
4. Does Pfeffernut County remind you of a community that you have lived in or visited?
5. Have you ever felt like a Farmer Cap in terms of doing something that others view as strange or nontraditional?
6. Why do the other farmers feel so strongly that Farmer Cap should plant traditional crops?
7. Throughout the story, the other farmers ask, “What do you think he's trying to grow?” Did you figure out what Farmer Cap was trying to grow, and if not, what did you think he was growing?
8. How do the views of the other farmers about Farmer Cap change?
9. If you could grow any crop in the world, what would it be?
10. How do the illustrations complement the text and help to bring Farmer Cap's story and Pfeffernut County to life?



A CONVERSATION WITH JILL KALZ:

Q. What inspired you to write *Farmer Cap*?

The inspiration for *Farmer Cap* came from a single image: a field full of hay bales wrapped in white plastic that I saw on my way home from supper one night on County Road 27, between Essig and New Ulm. I thought the bales looked like giant marshmallows, and then I wondered, "What kind of farmer would grow marshmallows? He'd have to be an odd one, for sure." And that's when the story of *Farmer Cap* began.

Q. What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing this book?

One challenge was to present Farmer Cap as a rounded character. I didn't want readers to see him as a one-dimensional nut. So I needed to show other sides of him, including his imagination and intelligence. I also wanted to show that Farmer Cap is open to sharing his talents and vision with others. OK, he's probably a little crazy, too, but there's much more to him than that.

Q. What do you hope your readers take away from *Farmer Cap*?

I hope readers take away a newfound or enhanced spirit of imagination, a feeling of boundless possibility. I hope they smile and laugh. I hope they feel as if Pfeffernut County is a warm and friendly place they'll want to revisit over and over again. I hope they feel that despite the bombardment of electronic media today, books are true treasures.

Q. What do you like most about your award winning book?

I love the way the text, the illustrations and the design work together to tell the story. I think I'll always be in awe of the fact that an artist half a world away (the illustrator lives in Turkey), could so precisely capture the story that unfolded in my head. There was some magic at work there. I also love the mystery surrounding the story, "What IS that strange old man trying to grow?"

Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

I've always been a writer, ever since I could first hold a pencil and form letters and words. I've always expressed myself best on paper. As a kid I wrote stories and mini soap operas, made my own books and magazines, wrote poetry for the school newspaper and entered poems in competitions.

In my second year of college I made the switch from a theater major to an English major, and immersed

myself in poetry and short fiction. I published my first work-for-hire nonfiction book for children (*Beehives*) a few years after finishing my MFA in creative writing. This book led me to a full-time editing job for a children's book publisher, which led to more writing opportunities, and eventually to beginning readers and picture books - and after nearly 50 titles, all the way to the Minnesota Book Awards!

Q. How do you enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

I love to read (mostly adult fiction), watch movies, travel (especially to places on the ocean), play with my Nikon P80, and share lunches and afternoon white-chocolate mochas with friends.

ABOUT JILL KALZ:

Jill Kalz is the author of nearly 50 children's books and works as a children's book editor in Mankato. As a resident of New Ulm, the small German town where she was born and raised, Kalz has a fondness for sauerkraut and an unusually high tolerance for polka. She lives with her dog Rum Tum Tuckerbean, a handsome bichon who shows up as a character in some of her books. Kalz received her MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota, Mankato. Her recent books include:



Henry Shortbull Swallows the Sun (part of the Pfeffernut County series), 2007
The Boy Who Loved Trains, 2007
Tuckerbean in the Kitchen, 2007

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.jillkalz.com.



The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. Visit us online at www.thefriends.org.

Reading guide production supported by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a Federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership, and a lifetime of learning; and the Minnesota Department of Education/State Library Agency, with funding under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

