



Danny Dunn and the Smallifying Machine

Jay Williams , Raymond Abrashkin , Paul Sagsoorian (Illustrator)

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Are there enemy spies following Professor Bullfinch? Is he working on a secret government invention?

Danny and his friends, Joe and Irene, decide they must warn the Professor of possible danger. They track him down to an old barn, where he's hidden his workshop. Once inside all they find is a weird and fascinating machine. Danny tries out one of two levers--but he isn't prepared for what happens next! He and his friends are trapped inside the machine and shrinking fast...

Danny Dunn and the Smallifying Machine Details

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From Reader Review Danny Dunn and the Smallifying Machine for online ebook

Shawn says

Danny and crew (and Cecil the terrier) are convinced that Prof. Bullfinch, while absorbed in his new project (so secret it's hidden in a barn in the woods and not at his home laboratory), is being shadowed by a spy (well, Cecil really isn't convinced of anything, he's just a dog after all...). But an impetuous act by Danny (I'm shocked) causes an accident and now all 5 of them are shrunk down to a quarter of an inch tall... can they survive at this size long enough to signal Dr. Grimes about their predicament?

THIS, without a doubt, was THE Danny Dunn book for me when I was a kid. I loved it at the time, learned a lot of things from it (how surface tension works for one, how walking is controlled falling for another - sorry, Laurie Anderson), and it would occasionally pop into my head on occasion throughout the years (like, when viewing HONEY I SHRUNK THE KIDS, for one). It's a (pardon the pun) very small scale adventure but not only is it incredibly visionary for a child reader (the initial chapter after being shrunk, "The Enormous Plain", is eerie and the whole approach to making the familiar unfamiliar and strange through variance of scale - protozoans the size of footballs - is a crash course in juvenile surrealism!), Williams' feel for his characters and deft hand at humor (the actual moment of the accident, with everyone tripping and tumbling into each other, falling into the machine, is very funny!) is also at a high point here.

Oddly, there's also a palpable sense of danger and threat in the book as well. It opens, surprisingly, with Joe mistakenly believing that Danny is committing suicide by throwing himself off the roof (he's testing a parachute) and Joe's very atypical (for a kid's book series), dour attitude and cowardice gets a fun workout throughout. When he's first "smallified", Danny even has this moment: "He lost all sense of his limbs, as if he had been whirled to bits and was now only a mind floating alone in empty blackness. I wonder if I've been killed? he thought, but even with the thought all thinking stopped. There was nothingness." Even Prof. Bullfinch is knocked unconscious for a while - a first in the series.

The actual science of the "smallifying" process is kind of glossed over (as might be expected) but basically involves a matter-rearranger that stores a copy of you and then creates an exact smaller duplicate - kind of like that worms episode of FUTURAMA. This, of course, leads to an existential crisis for Joe:

"The original is retained on file, as it were. When the process is reversed, the miniature is used as the pattern and the original is reconstructed from it."

Joe gulped once or twice. "Then I'm not really me," he said. "Is that what you mean?"

"In a sense, yes," the Professor answered. "The *you* standing here now is a tiny, but perfect copy of the you which fell into the machine."

"But I—I feel like me!"

"Of course you do," said the Professor. "You are exactly the same as the other you, only smaller."

"And the other me?"

"All the information about him — or you — and all the component molecules, are carefully stored in the

banks of the machine.”

“I feel weird,” Joe groaned. “I don’t think I can stand it. I’m in two places at the same time!”

“Yes, in a way,” said the Professor

The real science being taught is all about scale and some entomology, as our micro-explorers venture out into the grass for a look around (luckily, Irene has been absorbed with the topic recently).

There are some expected and unexpected character grace notes. Dr. Grimes saves the day (and even begrudgingly agrees to the name the machine with Danny's suggestion of "The Smallifier"). Irene quotes THE TEMPEST and Joe has to make money for Irene's birthday present because he spent his allowance on a copy of Louis Untermeyer's new collection of poetry (his own poem, read as usual near the end, is also a bit more inventive than previous, featuring a "shrinking" line construction). There are small gestures towards the maturation of the kids. Joe may say “You know I can’t stand girls. They’re a nuisance” but Irene, in a first, thinks the potential spy is "rather good-looking."

As for Danny's maturation - well, the entire plot motivator for the entire DANNY DUNN series can be summed up with this scene:

"On a panel next to it were some glass-fronted indicators, some calibrated dials, and a switch with a red handle. ON and OFF said two small plates. The switch was set to OFF.

For Danny Dunn, to see such a switch was to want to take hold of it. And once having put his hand on it, to see what would happen if he threw it.

He began to reach out. Then he thought, No, sir! I’m always acting in a headstrong manner. I’d better not touch it."

Would it surprise you to know that in LESS THAN 4 PARAGRAPHS Danny throws the switch?

Individualfrog says

Small scale in every sense, this example of the miniaturization genre focuses more on the physics, or at least the physical sensations, involved in being a quarter of an inch high. Any such story, read today, is inevitably in the shadow of those twin giants of smallification, "The Incredible Shrinking Man" and "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids". Danny and his friends do not wrestle with the psychological implications of shrinking, as in the former; more surprisingly, nor do they have much of an adventure like the latter. Unlike the Szalinski children, they spend only about an hour shrunk, and cross only perhaps a foot of ground, and thrills are few. No battles with enormous scorpions here.

Instead, they experience the strangeness of smallness. Their bodies are unbalanced and they must take a skating stride. They can fall from any height unhurt, because they are so light. To take a drink they must contend with surface tension and visible paramecia. It's a little dry, but does make the world at this scale seem interestingly alien.

I could always use more Joe and Irene in my Danny Dunn books; this is one where they have especially little to do, as Danny himself is involved in all the action scenes. But I suppose that's why he's the main character.

Celestia says

This is from my 9 year old daughter:

It's a book about a boy named Danny Dunn, and his friends Joe and Irene Miller. The story has different conflicts. The first conflict is that they want to find out if spies are following Professor Bullfinch. Another conflict is that after they are smallified they need to get bigger. The high point of the story is when a guy wearing a suitcoat rushes into a barn where Professor Bullfinch's invention, the smallifying machine, is. The conflict resolves when they find out the guy in the black suit is not a spy, and when they get unshrunk by Professor Grimes.

Noah K. says

I read this book over 25 years ago. This and the one with the remote controlled dragon fly have been in my head since then, but I just found the title. This was fun back then, but I think by today's standards it is a little dry.
