

Billy and the Unicorn by Terry Bisson

Terry Bisson lives in California where he writes shorter and shorter stories and co-hosts the monthly "SF in SF" reading series with poet Adam Cornford. On Amazon.com, he commented that "My 'Billy' stories are an attempt to capture in words, like a fly in corn syrup, the joy and the nightmare of being young. They're perfect for reading aloud to children you hope never to see again."

One day Billy saw a unicorn. He could tell what it was by the big horn growing out of its head. It was standing at the edge of the woods.

"Want a unicorn?" the unicorn asked. It was white.

Billy shook his head. "Girls like unicorns," he said. "I'm a boy."

"Boys would like unicorns too," said the unicorn, "if they knew what unicorns were really like."

Billy thought about that. "What are they really like?" he asked.

"Take me home and you'll see," said the unicorn.

"You're too big," said Billy.

"Yes, but unicorns don't eat anything," said the unicorn. "Plus, we're invisible."

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Billy took the unicorn home. It was hard to get it in the door. His mother couldn't see it, though.

He put it in his room and stood it in the corner. Its horn glowed in the dark.

"Turn out that light," said Billy's mother. "Go to sleep."

Cool! thought Billy. She could see the light but not the unicorn.

Billy hung a T-shirt over the unicorn's horn. It looked like a little ghost in the dark.

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"Hey," said Billy.

The unicorn was going to the bathroom.

"You can't go to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Too late," said the unicorn. A big blue jewel dropped down between its legs.

It was as big as a Brussels sprout. It had lots of square sides.

"Pick it up," said the unicorn.

"No way," said Billy.

After a while, the blue jewel disappeared.

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"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Unicorn Escapes from Zoo."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It went to the bathroom in my room," said Billy.

"Shut up," said Billy's father. "Go to your room. Both of you."

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When Billy got back to his room, the unicorn was going to the bathroom again.

"Hey," said Billy.

"Go ahead, pick it up," said the unicorn. "It doesn't stink."

Billy picked it up. It was warm, but it didn't stink.

"It's like money," said the unicorn. "You can buy magazines with it."

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Billy liked magazines. He went to the store and picked one out.

"Dale Earnhardt," said the store owner. "That's a special memorial issue. Got any money?"

Billy shook his head.

"Then you're out of luck," said the store owner. "He was one of the Greats."

"This is like money," said Billy. He showed the store owner the blue jewel. It was still warm.

The store owner sniffed it. "You get two for that," he said. He gave Billy another magazine. It was all about girls.

"I don't like girls," said Billy.

"Give it to your unicorn," said the store owner.

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"Did you really escape from the zoo?" Billy asked.

"No," said the unicorn. It was looking at the girls. Billy had to turn the pages. The unicorn had no hands.

"The paper says you did."

"I planted that story," said the unicorn. "There is no zoo."

Billy thought about that.

"Turn the page," said the unicorn.

"I thought you didn't like girls," said Billy.

"These aren't wearing any clothes," said the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Can I ride on your back?" Billy asked.

"After you go to bed," said the unicorn.

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That night Billy rode the unicorn around the yard. Its horn was like a headlight. It left little tracks in the

sandbox.

"How come my mother can't see you?" Billy asked.

"She never tried," said the unicorn. "Plus, unicorns are invisible."

"How come I can see you, then?"

"We're not that invisible," said the unicorn.

Billy thought about that. "Can I take you to school?" he asked.

"Unicorns don't like school," said the unicorn.

* * * *

Billy was watching TV when the phone rang.

It was the store owner. "I want my magazines back," he said. "That jewel disappeared."

"It's like money," said Billy.

"Money doesn't disappear," said the store owner. "Bring back my magazines or I will call the FBI."

"I'm not afraid of the FBI," said Billy.

But he was. His hands were trembling as he hung up the phone.

"Who was that?" asked Billy's mother.

"Nobody," said Billy.

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"Where's my Dale Earnhardt magazine?" asked Billy. He couldn't find it anywhere.

"I found out he's dead," said the unicorn. "So I tore it up with my horn."

"Oh no," said Billy. "He was one of the Greats."

"Dead people don't belong in magazines," said the unicorn.

"The store owner wants his magazines back," said Billy. He tried to get the girl magazine back but the unicorn was standing on it. It had sharp feet like a deer.

"You're going to get us both in trouble," said Billy. "He'll call the FBI."

"Just turn the page," said the unicorn. "Let me worry about him."

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"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper. "Store Owner Killed by Unicorn."

"I thought they were make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"It's invisible," said Billy. "It has a sharp horn."

"Shut up, both of you," said Billy's father.

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"That was cool," said Billy. "But I think you should hide somewhere else." He was getting tired of the unicorn.

"I like here," said the unicorn. "But I need another magazine. I'm finished with this one."

Billy had an idea. "You would like it at school," he said. "There are lots of girls there."

"Do they wear clothes?" asked the unicorn. "It's their clothes I don't like."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy. "They will let you look up their dresses."

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The next day, Billy took the unicorn to school. The teacher couldn't see it. The boys couldn't either.

The girls could, though. "Billy has a unicorn," they said, clapping their hands together. "Can we ride on it?"

"You can have it," said Billy. He was tired of the unicorn. "Jewels come out of its butt."

"That's cool," said the girls. "It can sleep in the girls' bathroom."

"It doesn't sleep," said Billy.

"Get on," said the unicorn. It took all the girls for a ride. It looked up their dresses as they got on and off.

"What's going on?" asked the boys.

Billy told them about the unicorn. "It's invisible," he said. He left out the part about the store owner.

"Invisible stuff is make-believe," said the boys. "Plus, unicorns are strictly for girls."

"Boys would like unicorns too, if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

But the boys couldn't see it. "Billy has a unicorn," they said. "Billy the girl!"

They made fun of Billy.

This was their big mistake.

"Home from school already?" asked Billy's mother.

"They let us out early," said Billy.

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"Get a load of this," said Billy's father. He was reading the paper at the supper table. "Unicorn Kills School Boys."

"That must be why they let Billy out early," said Billy's mother. "It was a tragedy."

"It says here that it tore them up with its horn," said Billy's father. "Then it ran into the girls' bathroom."

"Girls like unicorns," said Billy's mother.

"The teacher called the FBI," said Billy's father. "They will investigate."

"It wasn't my fault," said Billy.

"Nobody said it was," said Billy's father. "Pass the Brussels sprouts."

"I'm pretty sure unicorns are make-believe," said Billy's mother.

"Boys would like unicorns too if they knew what they were really like," said Billy.

"No they wouldn't," said Billy's father. "Now shut up, both of you."