
THE PLAIN DEALER

On a String and a Prayer

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James F. Sweeney

Bubblegum Books' first two children's books are about using imagination to make something out of nothing. Namely, a piece of string and a hubcap.

It's not a bad analogy for the creation of the publishing company itself, which began as idle talk between two co-workers.

Julie Goulis is a copywriter at a Cleveland advertising agency where John Ferguson is an illustrator. In 2003, while looking for an outside project, they settled on writing a children's book.

Ferguson saw the way his two young children loved Curious George and other classics; he'd also read a lot of bad children's books.

"We wanted to see if we could do something better," he says.

They knew they wanted to explore imagination. While driving back to Cleveland from Boston over Memorial Day of that year, Goulis came upon the idea of writing about the possibilities of string.

They created *The Things a String Can Be* quickly but couldn't interest a publisher. So Goulis and Ferguson joined with Goulis' fianc to form Bubblegum Books and published the book last year.

Written by Goulis, 33, and illustrated by Ferguson, 36, the book is aimed at children who cannot yet read or who are just learning to do so. It tells the story of Sam, a boy who uses his imagination to turn a piece of string into a jungle vine, a climbing rope and a necklace for his mom.

Bubblegum reprinted the book this year with a string activity guide at the back for parents and teachers. It has sold more than 4,000 copies.

Bubblegum's second book, *Something Shiny, Something Round*, is due out next month. It will have the same characters, only this time it's a hubcap that becomes more fun than a PlayStation 2.

They plan to publish at least two more books in this series and hope to be successful enough to eventually do it full time.

- James F. Sweeney

"*The Things a String Can Be*" (\$14.99) is available at area bookstores or online at www.bubblegumbooks.com. "*Something Shiny, Something Round*" will be available next month.