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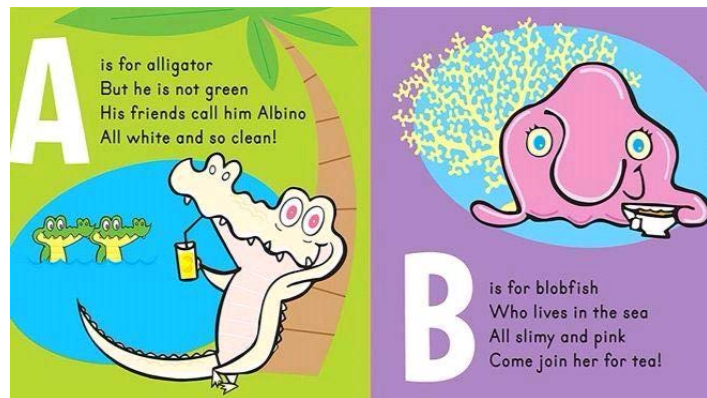
Books for babies get the Ripley touch

Ripley Publishing's new "board books" present oddities and freakish facts in a new way — to preschoolers.

Yes, kids, the world is becoming even more unbelievable for young readers. "Ripley's Believe It or Not! ODDphabet" and "Ripley's Believe It or Not! Wacky 1-2-3" rely on unusual animals to entertain babies and their parents.

Mommies and daddies grew up with and are fond of the Ripley brand, said Sabrina Sieck, lead researcher for Orlando-based Ripley Entertainment, which established its publishing arm about a decade ago.

"They watched the [Ripley's] TV show, whether it was with Jack Palance or Dean Cain," Sieck said. "They want to share that with their children. That makes reading the book and teaching them their ABC's or 123's a lot more fun for the parent."



Two new books from Ripley Publishing are aimed at the youngest readers. They use unusual animals -- such as an albino alligator or a blobfish -- in a board book format. (Ripley Entertainment)

The content is slightly edgier than the average board books. Instead of the basic "A is for apple," the "ODDphabet" book goes with "A is for albino alligators."

"We want the characters to look fun and exciting," Sieck said. "Zebras have some cool facts, but they're not so exciting, so we went with a zorse, which is a horse-zebra hybrid."

Ripley editors who teamed up for the new products typically compile grown-up books that throw together 60-foot-long gingerbread houses, creatively pierced people, the World Custard Pie Championships and assorted natural wonders. Ripley already had a line for older kids, but publications for the youngest crowd come with new challenges such as rhyming schemes and keeping the facts age-appropriate.

But what animal merited the X slot?

"X was difficult, but we did an X-ray tetra, which is actually a see-through fish," Sieck said.

The board books were illustrated by John Graziano, who also draws the daily “Believe It or Not” comic strip that has been in production for 99 years. Graziano works at the corporate headquarters in south Orlando and has been on the job 12 years.

“What I liked about working on these board books is that I had to totally come up with something different and something that’s more kid-friendly and modern,” he said. The style of the strip is less cartoonish than his usual work and more illustrative, fitting the factual nature of the content, Graziano said.

One “ODDphabet” favorite was a turtle with a mohawk, Graziano said.

“It’s really, like, moss that grows on the turtle, but it looks like a mohawk ... it’s a real thing,” he said. Kids have fun with the animals, but parents Google the creatures to see if they’re for real, he said.

Other creatures included a sports-playing lobster and a blobfish, which Graziano said he had to draw a little less scary than it is in reality. The books’ images are hand-drawn, then colored with a computer and then smoothed out — a process called “vectorizing” — for print, he said.

Board books are simple but sturdy publications with heavy pages made of compressed cardboard, perfect for kids still developing motor skills and drool control.

“Babies at that age are very tactile, and they want to be able to hold and chew and fold and grab. Board books allow that to be done without damaging the book too much,” said LeAnne Rollins, business-development manager of Writer’s Block Bookstore in Winter Park. They’re also a tool for bonding between parents and children.

“If they do have a twist, it can only make it just that more fun and interesting for both,” Rollins said.

The 6-inch-square books have 26 pages, and can be found in bookstores for \$6.99. A line of related plush toys have also been developed.

But now, what comes after zorse?

“We’ve definitely thought through some ideas to expand the line, but we want to see how these go,” Sieck said.