



# The Monkeyface Chronicles

*Richard Scarsbrook*

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In his third novel, Richard Scarsbrook returns to the fictional Faireville of his previous novels *Cheeseburger Subversive* (2003) and *Featherless Bipedes* (2006) to present Philip Skyler in a three part chronicle: his eighth-grade introduction to public school, his twelfth-grade challenges, and his recovery from a life-threatening motorcycle accident. The reader meets Philip the day he turns 13 in his family environment and at school where he falls victim to the school bullies, two of whom are the sons of Mr. Brush, the school principle, who deliver a vicious version of the outlawed "Birthday Beats." Accompanied by his mom and grandfather, Philip reluctantly returns to the school to meet with the administration. When challenged by grandfather Skyler, the principal asks students to verify the account as filed. To Philip's shock, two students find the courage to detail events as they actually happened, the other students corroborate their version, and the principle is forced to process an "Official Notice of Suspension" for his sons. The bullies and their entourage continue to make life difficult, but Philip learns to handle them and survive his immersion into public school after years of home-schooling that shielded him from the inevitable cruelty of his peers. When the chronicle resumes five years later, Philip has established a network of friends, collected a girlfriend, achieved considerable recognition for his academic abilities, and plays regularly for the school hockey on its way to the playoffs. Scarsbrook reveals the Skyler family dysfunction throughout the chronicle recording an uninvolved father, a doting mother, and the ever-present aphorism-spouting grandfather. Unfortunately, Philip's senior year at high school turns tragic when, thanks to a vicious, deliberate hit by the Brush brothers, his brother Michael suffers a broken neck, shattered vertebrae, severe concussion, and lies near death in hospital. Distraught at his brother's condition, Philip discovers vandals have destroyed his home, and then he receives a further shock when he overhears a loud altercation between his father and grandfather about his paternity. He tears away from the scene on his father's motorcycle, crashes, somehow survives, and endures months of surgeries, therapy, and rehabilitation, often in a drug-induced, pain controlling fog. When he finally gains release from the medical world two years later, Philip has a new face, a new voice, and a healed body, but he feels the need to reunite with his family and his Faireville life. Returning home to a celebration with his family, Philip is overwhelmed by events and exits the scene to reunite with former classmates and his town. Scarsbrook concludes the novel ten years down the road with the aphorism, "Live well. It is the greatest revenge." The multi-layered, engrossing, complex tale reveals a unique coming-of-age novel peopled by characters whose strengths and weaknesses form a framework for the plot twists. Densely packed with topics, the novel considers dysfunctional families, peer pressure, physical deformities, religious fanaticism, bullying, political gamesmanship, competitive athletics, medical disorders, questionable business practices, revenge, appearance-versus-reality, social misfits, among others. Philip, as first-person narrator, provides the reader with details of daily life, with memorable, not necessarily admirable characters, and with plenty of action while imparting his personal observations and revealing his evolving philosophy of life. Scarsbrook carefully designs a protagonist who is modest, sees humour among the absurdities and struggles of daily life, manages the restrictions imposed by his facial deformity, and insightfully evaluates himself, his family, and his community. Well-paced prose infused with light humour produces some memorable scenes that resonate with credibility. Brisk, realistic dialogue reflects the author's years of listening to student chatter as an elementary, secondary, and college level teacher. Author, songwriter, actor, musician, Scarsbrook seamlessly incorporates several previously published short stories as chapters in the novel, linking them effectively with the plot. In remarkable, keenly observed detail, he excels at capturing ordinary and extraordinary moments of life in a tale to engage and entertain readers of any age. The *Monkeyface Chronicles* is not an easy read, but it amply rewards those who persevere.

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