

Hooked on veggies: The triumph of Junior Asparagus

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [August 28, 2002](#) issue

Mage Knights, those miniature warriors with names like Gibbering Ghoul, Bone Grinder, Soul Stealer and Weresabertooth, were all the rage last year in elementary school. Though designed primarily for the adolescent male world of gaming enthusiasts, Mage Knights also cast their spell on the younger set. During recess, it was not unusual to see all the first-grade boys, among them our son Andy, huddled together analyzing damage points and engaging in trade negotiations tough enough to give General Motors a run for its money.

My husband and I looked on with amazement, but we were not thrilled to have our homes invaded by creatures reminiscent of H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu or by man-eating she-warriors in extreme décolletage. We faced a choice—resign ourselves to a distasteful but passing fad or deprive Andy of a basis for social interaction.

It's a never-ending struggle to protect our children from a degenerate media culture, and we are grateful for any help we can get. In the matter of Mage Knights, help came from an unexpected source. An Orthodox friend dropped by the house with a pile of Christian videos—entertaining Bible skits and morality plays, she told us, in which all the parts are played by vegetables. Her children are girls, however, and girls are better able than boys to tolerate goody-goody stuff. We let *VeggieTales* sit unwatched for six months.

Then one day we decided to take a look. Instantly the whole family was hooked, including Andy and our teenage son John. The glistening 3-D computer animation is at once home-grown and professional, the scripts are witty, the musical scores and send-ups often hilarious, and the message (“God made you special and He loves you very much”) is free of mawkishness, thanks to the gentle absurdity in every tale. There is sophisticated but uncynical use of literary allusion, cinematic *hommage* and parody, with recognizable strains of Gilbert and Sullivan, Abbott and Costello, Shakespeare, Monty Python, *Madame Bovary* and even “The Gourds Must Be Crazy.”

Who would expect the creators of a Christian children's video to know that highbrow French film critics have made an art-cult hero out of Jerry Lewis?

The series began in the garage of Phil Vischer, a computer animator who performed in churches as part of a puppet team during his Bible college years. Co-creator Mike Nawrocki was a fellow puppeteer. Together with Phil Vischer's wife, Lisa, they provide the leading voices: Larry the Cucumber, Bob the Tomato and Junior Asparagus.

Bob and Larry are the hosts of the show, which always opens on a kitchen counter. They introduce each episode and conclude with a pointed lesson and verse from the Bible. The main action unfolds as a play-within-a-play; makeshift cardboard sets are propped up against the kitchen wall and the vegetables don period costumes to assume their dramatis personae. Junior Asparagus plays the part of a young king David. Brave in all his littleness, he confronts a Philistine army of French peas and defeats their champion Goliath, a nine-foot pickle. Joshua is played by Larry, whose slight lisp and rubbery expressiveness make him seem vulnerable and alive. In between episodes he provides a comic interlude of nonsense songs, and in other episodes becomes "Larry-Boy," a sweetly gullible superhero whose supersuction ears are really plumber's helpers. The first time we watched "Larry-Boy and the Rumor Weed," Andy pointed out that Larry-Boy never wins by his own strength. Junior Asparagus defeats the malignant weed by a simple act of straightforward, nonpsychological confession: he admits that he started the rumor. God doesn't want us to tell stories that hurt.

It's good fun, but is it gospel fun? All I know is that when "Larry-Boy and the Rumor Weed" ended, I went into the living room to find my husband listening to Bach's cantata *Widerstehe doch der Sünde*, and the lesson seemed the same as in "Larry-Boy": "Resist indeed sin, or its poison seizes you." If you feed sin, it grows, but if you resist it, it takes flight. What a godsend to find a children's program with a sense of sin that is not prudish and of grace that is not cloying.

VeggieTales is a marketing achievement as well. Having moved beyond Christian bookstores to be distributed in Wal-Mart, Target and other chains, *VeggieTales* has sold nearly 30 million videos. With a feature film (*Jonah*) scheduled for release in October, an ambitious program of merchandise tie-ins, and talk of competing against Pixar and Disney, one can only hope they won't get lost in the aisles of Madame Blueberry's all-consuming Stuffmart.

Some have faulted *VeggieTales* for presenting a generic form of “biblical values,” one from which the confession of Jesus Christ seems absent. Yet Christ is surely present in the scriptural word that seals each episode, and it would hardly be edifying to bring him on stage as an eggplant. Moreover, there’s something mysterious about the gleaming kitchen counter, which subsists as the unchanging reality on which the stage sets are propped. Are the three flour-and-sugar canisters merely a coincidence? What about the oversized three-pronged electrical outlet that is never far from view—could it be a subliminal message that all power comes from the triune God? Maybe that’s stretching things too far. For now it’s enough to know that Junior Asparagus has triumphed in his littleness, overcoming the Gibbering Ghoul.