

The Washington Post

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2005

M4



NICKELODEON

You've got snail! SpongeBob learns not to take his pet for granted.

TV Preview

SpongeBob Squeezes Tears Of Laughter Out of Snail Tale

By TOM SHALES
Washington Post Staff Writer

Probably the funniest half-hour of TV airing tonight is a tale of abandonment, loneliness, grief and regret. It's not just funny, it's deeply hilarious: a new 22-minute episode of "SpongeBob SquarePants" that Nickelodeon is calling a "half-hour special" (most episodes are 11 minutes long) and is unveiling in prime time, at 8.

When "SpongeBob" takes over, Nickel-

odeon stops being exclusively a kids' network. Indeed, the thin-skinned – actually, no-skinned – undersea creature regularly attracts nearly 13 million adults 18 and older to his daily antics and shenanigans. His is the top-ranked show among children ages 2 and 11.

Watch it with children between 2 and 11, as I have on many a happy occasion, and you might find yourself laughing more than

See TV PREVIEW, C7, Col. 3

Tonight's Most Absorbing 22 Minutes

TV PREVIEW, From *C1*

they do. And perhaps getting quizzical stares from them for doing so. But funny is funny. Conan O'Brien is funny. Chris Rock is funny. And "SpongeBob SquarePants," created by Stephen Hillenburg, is sublimely funny—crazed, surreal and farcically absurdist.

To make life even sweeter, Nickelodeon announced yesterday that it has ordered 20 more original episodes of "SpongeBob" to air next year, bringing the number of episodes to 100. The new ones join the old ones in perpetual rotation, and there are children out there who've seen every episode produced. No, I am not one of them. I'm sure I've missed at least, uhh, duhhh—well,

let's just say "several." In fact, "many."

Perhaps in time this deficiency can be rectified.

The new "special" episode is what might be called a bittersweet riot. Titled "Where's Gary?," it's filled with the usual amusing extravagances—SpongeBob is so determined to master a paddle ball and win a contest that he spends a solid week doing nothing else but practicing (usually hitting himself in the eye)—but it also has a melancholy undertone. Or, since it all takes place at the bottom of the sea, undertow.

The "Gary" in the title is SpongeBob's supremely beloved pet, a benign and passive snail who largely keeps to himself, occasionally utters a meek "meow" and, when he does

venture out, tends to leave a trail of slime. As the episode begins, SpongeBob arrives home with a heavy bag of snail food for Gary but is distracted by the concurrent arrival of his new Mermaid Man and Barnacle Bill Paddle-Ball Set.

He forgets everything else except the obsession at hand—this sponge is nothing if not monomaniacal—and Gary is distressed to find, upon oozing over to his dish, that it contains nothing but an old fly, a cobweb and some sort of lint. Unable to get SpongeBob's attention, Gary runs away—in the loosest possible sense of that term—and is soon onboard a Snailways Bus that will take him to either the innermost or outermost reaches of Bikini Bottom, where "SpongeBob" is set.

There, he encounters a seemingly kindly old battle-ax who, mistaking Gary for a missing pet of her own, takes him home and showers him with kindness. Also with cookies and deviled eggs. The woman is voiced by Amy Poehler, one of the stars of "Saturday Night Live." Also guesting on the episode is the rock group Stew (no, I had never heard of them, either), singing an original plaintive ballad, "Gary's Song."

"Gary, I was a fool!" wails SpongeBob when he realizes what happened while he was paddle-balling himself into imbecility. "I blew it, I really blew it. I took you for granted, Gary! I'm sorry!" In addition to the prolonged agonized soliloquy, SpongeBob plasters every available storefront and pole with posters imploring Gary to come home.

There is a lesson here, of course—not so much a lesson as a parody of a lesson, since the morals of the "SpongeBob" stories are always extremely and satirically obvious: Treasure your friends and treat them well, and that certainly includes your pets.

Extremely attentive "SpongeBob" viewers will find the episode slightly familiar in that once before, Gary took a leave of absence. That was on a regular-length episode called "Dumped," in which SpongeBob watched in helpless horror as Gary became very, very close friends with SpongeBob's pal Patrick, a dim-witted starfish who lives nearby.

It turns out that Gary's devotion to Patrick had everything to do with the treats that Patrick was carrying around in his pocket and nothing to do with Patrick himself. Gary and SpongeBob were reunited in fraternal bliss—until this latest catastrophe.

Silly? Yes. Outrageous? Of course. Unforgivably and inexcusably ridiculous? Well, no. The ridiculousness is quite forgivable and is its own excuse. While the supporting players contribute substantially to the episodes—Sandy Cheeks the squirrel, misanthropic Squidward and penny-pinching Mr. Krabs, custodian of the price-less recipe for Krabby Patties—it's SpongeBob who is the show's goofy, glowing source of comic energy.

SpongeBob, who hates to let any emotion go unexpressed, who overdoes every reaction lest he be guilty of taking any aspect of life for granted, who asks nothing from the world but perpetual happiness and whose crazed, curdled laugh epitomizes his restless zest for excess. He is, like many of those watching, an innocent and, unlike those watching, will stay one forever.

Or at least as long as Nickelodeon keeps picking up his option and renewing his series.

SpongeBob SquarePants (30 minutes)
airs tonight at 8 on Nickelodeon.