

# Phillie Phanatic Tom Burgoyne doubles as a children's author

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## For 20 years, the Phillie Phanatic has doubled as a children's author, and nothing gives him a bigger thrill

Tom Burgoyne's latest book will be given away to all fans 14 and under at Sunday's Phillies game against the Washington Nationals.



Tom Burgoyne, the man who portrays the Phillie Phanatic, has written 20 children's books about the mascot. His latest book comes out May 19 as a giveaway at the game against the Washington Nationals. [Read more](#) Monica Herndon / Staff Photographer

by [Matt Breen](#)

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Tom Burgoyne will leave the furry green costume in the basement of Citizens Bank Park on Sunday morning when he wanders to one of the ballpark's entrances. Burgoyne has been the Phanatic — he insists he's just the mascot's best friend and not the performer inside — for 30 years, helping to mold a flightless bird into an iconic character.

He dances on the dugout, mixes it up with opposing players, and even received his own parade float when the Phillies won the World Series. As the Phanatic, Burgoyne has seen it all. But there's still something special about the 15 minutes he'll spend on Sunday, simply watching kids walk into the park and receive a book he wrote.

Burgoyne grew up in Jenkintown, went to his first Phillies game in 1971 at opening day of the new Veterans Stadium, and climbed a statue across City Hall in 1980 to get a better view of the team's first parade. He was a diehard fan who wrote in his eighth-grade yearbook at Immaculate Conception that he wanted to be The Inquirer's Phillies beat writer when he grew up. Four years later, he told the student newspaper at St. Joseph's Prep that he would become The Phanatic.

So consider Sunday — when all fans 14 and under receive the latest Phanatic book written by Burgoyne — a merger of two childhood dreams: the writer and the mascot.

"It really makes me feel special," said Burgoyne, who has now written 20 children's books since launching the Phanatic series in 2004. "I think of my kids and how I used to read to them. I see all the kids grabbing their books and paging through them. Then I know that later that night, there's a pretty big percentage of parents who are going to be reading those books to their kids. It's pretty cool. That's for sure."

## **Becoming The Phanatic**

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Burgoyne graduated from Drexel in 1988 and took a job in sales selling business forms and computer supplies.

"I wasn't doing a very good job of it because six months after taking the job I was looking at the wanted ads," Burgoyne said.

He spotted an anonymous ad in The Inquirer that requested resumés for mascots. Burgoyne, who performed as the Hawk at St. Joe's Prep, figured he'd give it a shot.

"I thought I was going to be a Hamburglar on the street or the guy in the Statue of Liberty at tax time," he said.

The Phillies called. The wanted ad was theirs, and they invited Burgoyne to audition along with a cast of people who had much more experience than the former high school mascot. He brought a photo of him dressed in a tuxedo at Julius Erving's final game and a photo of him atop that statue in 1980 that ran in *The Inquirer*.

Burgoyne didn't have the experience, but he had the passion. The Phillies videotaped everyone performing in the green costume and then watched the tapes without knowing who was inside. Burgoyne won.

"The Phillies basically hired a statue climber," he said.

Burgoyne spent five seasons as the understudy to Dave Raymond, who breathed life into *The Phanatic* in the 1970s after being pushed into the costume as an intern. Burgoyne left his sales career as he performed at community events, played music at *The Vet*, and helped Raymond brainstorm ideas for the green mascot from the Galápagos Islands. In 1994, the snout became his.

"I just feel so blessed," Burgoyne said. "When I give talks, I say 'What did you tell your mom and dad that you wanted to be?' Try to remember what you would've told them and follow that passion. I say follow your Phanatic."

## **Becoming a writer**

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Burgoyne's neighbor gave him a book in the early 2000s about the 1960 Eagles. Burgoyne asked him what it was, and Bob Gordon told him he wrote it.

"You wrote a book? What are you talking about? I thought you worked at Peco?" Burgoyne said.

Gordon was a freelance writer who wrote sports columns and restaurant reviews before writing 200 pages on Chuck Bednarik and the rest of that NFL Championship team. Gordon had an idea. Perhaps he could partner with Burgoyne to write a book about the 1993 Phillies. The mascot who once dreamed to be a writer was in.

The book, which was released in 2002, did well, and the neighbors teamed up a few years later on another book. Burgoyne, who fell in love with creative writing as a third-grader, loved it. One night, he was reading to his young kids and had an idea. Maybe he could write his own children's books. If there's a series of *Arthur* books, Burgoyne thought there could be a series of Phanatic books.

He wrote his first Phanatic book — *The Phillie Phanatic's Happiest Memories* — in 2004. The books, which are given out for free each year at a game and then sold at the ballpark, have become a "labor of love" for the guy who knows the Phanatic better than anyone.

"I know the character well enough so writing the stories isn't a great leap for me," Burgoyne said. "But having them illustrated is a whole different story. It's a lot of work and it's probably why every mascot doesn't have his own book series."

The books were first illustrated by Len Epstein, who worked for the team since the 1980s. Epstein died in 2021, and Burgoyne recruited Harry Moore, a graphic artist for Nickelodeon and Disney who worked as a scoreboard operator at The Vet in the 1990s.

Burgoyne will think about a story idea, brainstorm for a few weeks about how he can fit it into 32 pages, and then startle out of bed to write.

"I'll get up at 4 o'clock that morning," Burgoyne said. "My wife will know what I'm doing. I'm like 'I'm on this. I'm not going to stop.' Then by 10 or 11 o'clock in the morning, I have it. I feel like Neil Young when he wrote 'Ohio.' He went out to the woods, and he wrote it in five minutes."

## **Making an impact**

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The book Burgoyne will watch kids receive on Sunday is about the Phanatic teaching a group of kids from a fictional Pennsylvania town how to play baseball and then guiding them to the Little League World Series. It was inspired by Burgoyne's trip last summer to Williamsport, Pa., when the Phillies played in the Little League Classic.

He already has next year's idea ready. Burgoyne will center it on the team's upcoming trip in June to London.

"I'm still thinking like is the Phanatic going to be king for a day in London? How much havoc can he wreak in one country," Burgoyne said. "I already get yelled at by history teachers in school because they read The Phanatic's Philadelphia Story, and they're like, 'Yeah, the Phanatic didn't sign the Declaration of Independence. He didn't discover electricity. It wasn't his idea for the flag.'"

The Phanatic has always visited schools, but the book series pushed the Phillies to create a reading program for students in preschool through eighth grade, motivating them to read for 15 minutes a day.

More than 146,000 students participate in The Phanatic About Reading program. Burgoyne has visited schools across the region where he gives out more of his books to kids and helps reading become more accessible.

"Some of us take it for granted, being able to buy a book or having a whole library of kids' books," Burgoyne said. "You have all these books, and it's great. But for some kids, having a book is pretty special. We've gone into some schools where they hold those books like they're gold."

Burgoyne will perform Sunday afternoon as the Phanatic, getting himself into the usual high jinks that have become standard fare at a Phillies game. Maybe he'll smash a Nationals helmet, dance with an umpire, or shoot hot dogs into the crowd. But first, Burgoyne will stand as himself at the gate and watch his books find new owners.

"I get a real kick when people come up to me and say, 'I was just reading your book to my kid last night,'" he said. "I know being a friend of the Phanatic all these years that the Phanatic has created all these laughs. But that idea of a mom or dad sitting in bed, reading to their kid at night one of our Phanatic books, that gives me more of a thrill than anything."