

The Bendy Bus by Mike Longman

Contributed by Mike Longman

Ben stands only about 3 foot 5 and has spent most of his years on ten very rural acres on the outskirts of Middlebury Vermont, but right around when he turned four he had pretty much decided he was a New Yorker at heart and a major reason for this would seem to be his great joy in riding the "Bendy Bus." For the non-straphanger, Ben is referring of course to the articulated accordion, or tandem busses as the Brits prefer, which are most often seen or enjoyed (depending upon your internal age) chugging their way along various cross-town routes. Kids like Ben like just watching these impossibly long busses from the outside, as they snake their way through tight turns, like from the wide expanse of Amsterdam Avenue to the tight squeeze of 81st Street. But, the real joy is found on the inside, and in particular on the two pairs of blue plastic seats that face each other, which are attached to a giant silver metal turntable that joins the front and the back of the bus together. The bend of the bus is where the action is. Any number of kids know the importance of scrambling on first, to be sure to get one of these special seats; otherwise you may have to wait your turn—and since crosstown trips are not that long, you are in real danger of not getting one for the entire ride. This can be especially vexing during slow rush-hour rides after school. Ben generally gets to New York about once or twice a year, and he is more than willing to put up with all those things adults want him to do, like visits to the Children's Museum, or walking through the park to the petting zoo. But, what Ben really likes to do, is take a long spin---cross-town and back is best—on the Bendy Bus. Being an adult Uncle, I had thought myself pretty insightful for figuring out that this was Ben's special joy. I had even figured out he was partial to the 79th street line, although in a pinch the M86 would do. I had also come to believe that this was one of those tourist things that are special for out-of-town kids who are awed by the big city. Living in Vermont, Ben's motoring thrills are generally limited to when the local John Deere manager lets him sit atop one of the giant combines in the sales lot. My "out-of-towner" notion was shattered on a recent Bendy Bus journey when Ben trotted to the back to find that only one of the four key seats was open. He jumped up into the open seat next to an older man. Across from them sat two little girls--each talking knowingly of the Upper East Side. Their accents clearly betrayed them as New Yorkers and here they were riding the bus, seemingly just for the sake of getting to ride in those special seats. I looked at the older man, probably a grand-dad. It was clear that he had figured it out, too. Being four, Ben is quite willing to strike up a conversation with just about anybody, and when riding the Bendy Bus he is most often likely to refer to his expertise, like how the turntable moves the seats around when the bus turns. This is very magical stuff. I knew that these bus rides were great for Ben's social skills but, I had no idea they would one day prove a major test of his character. This happened last year when there were three generations of us, Ben—his dad (my brother) and our dad all walking to the bus stop. On the way, we passed several toy stores and Ben, being an able negotiator, convinced us that as we had already passed up one or two, it was now absolutely necessary that we at least take a peek inside this one. We were somewhat reluctant, as we knew that Ben had just gotten a toy yesterday, and that there was no way he would be getting another one today. Still, using his best logic, Ben successfully argued that a visit was permitted, since "We were just going to go inside and look." No sooner did we get inside than we all spotted it. Right in the center of the store, on top of a pile of other toys, gleaming through the plastic window in its box, was an exact replica of the Bendy Bus, MTA decals and all. At this shocking development, Ben proved himself to be quite a trooper. He had gotten a "really cool," far larger truck on Saturday, and he was about to do one of his very favorite things, go for a ride on the bendy bus, so yes, even though it was amazingly tempting, Ben marched with us out of the store without shedding any major tears. We all breathed a collective sigh of relief as we walked to the 86th Street bus stop. As always, Ben was the first to board, and he was about to make his usual way to the bend of the bus, he stopped short. He had spied a kid in one of the front seats with his dad. The kid waved hello with one hand and with the other held up a proud new possession—he had just unwrapped his very own toy Bendy Bus. Ben took a look across from the boy, and we took the seats next to Ben. The kid was about a year older, and he was no tourist. He had that all-knowing quality that New York kids have, and for the next few minutes he proceeded to wave the toy around and explain to Ben how this was the perfect toy and how precise and exact it was in capturing all of the amazing qualities of the Bendy Bus. This was one of those truly uncomfortable moments when none of us quite knew what was going to happen next. Would Ben burst out in tears? Try to rip the bus from the other kid's hands? What would any of us do if we were a kid in this very same situation? The dad across from us had no way of knowing that Ben had just passed up a toy Bendy Bus, but he did seem to sense that his kid was going a little overboard in showing off his present. Then Ben spoke. "Yes," he said, "well, I got a really big truck yesterday." All of us breathed a major sigh. And, for the next five minutes Ben and the boy went back and forth on the pros and cons of each of these toys, one versus the other. We did not know whether to laugh or cry. We simply sat in awe. The kid, clutching his toy, thankfully got off around Fifth Avenue. And, when the holidays rolled around, I was determined that Ben would finally get his Bendy Bus. It took three toy stores to find one in stock. Come Christmas Day we discovered that my dad had been on a mission of his own, and we all had a few laughs as Ben got not one toy Bendy Bus, but two. This morning I found myself climbing aboard a cross-town bus and noticed this one looked different in the snout. Wow, I thought, Ben's not the only one getting multiple Bendy Buses; the MTA must have purchased a new batch. Won't he think this is cool? It was rush hour and the bus was packed, so it took me a while to squeeze by all the commuters. On the way to the back, I noticed that the handrails were painted a particularly florescent shade of orange, and figured Ben would probably like that too. Then I got to the key spot, the metal turn table was still there, but it looked just a little bit smaller...something was missing...what was it? The seats! The two pairs of plastic blue seats were gone...and the back of the bus, it looked like some of that was missing too. It kind of looked like one and three-quarters of a bus, instead of two busses stuck together at the middle. And now there are no seats! What the heck is the MTA doing here? Do they know how many kids ride these cross-town buses just to sit in those special seats? When I got home, I went on-line

took just a click to figure out that the old version of the Bendy Bus, the New Flyer Industries D60HF (articulated), was being replaced by the NOVA ZF Ecomat 6HP-604C. All very interesting and highly technical, but it said nothing about the missing seats. ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ Ben is not due to return to New York until the fall, and I am really not sure what I should do about his beloved Bendy Bus. Should I fess up and break it to him in advance that the special blue seats are gone? Should I try to scope out the routes where they use mostly older busses and maybe be able to hold out for another year, so I won't have to break it to him until he is six or maybe seven? ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ ^ What the heck, maybe he will like hang onto the new florescent orange handrails and standing on the edge of the metal turn table as the bus makes its turns. Or, I could do what any other true New Yorker would do and just blame it on the mayor.