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New PBS TV shows will keep kids spellbound with emphasis on words

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PBS celebrates Labor Day, in part, by unveiling two new animated children's series, both welcome additions to public TV's educational yet entertaining canon: "Word World," a reading-skills show for preschoolers, and "WordGirl," a vocabulary-building series for a slightly older set.

"Word World," premiering today at 10:30 a.m. (WNET-Ch. 13), is a world of Teletubby colors, talking animals and a major emphasis on how letters combine to form words. In "Word World," many of the characters and objects are literally the sum of their spelled parts: a barn is built from the letters B-A-R-N, and even the animals, if you look closely, are made up of letters.

Duck, for example, has a D for a head, a K for his tufty tail, and a U-C body in between. Bear has a big B head, and an R for a rea. For some reason, all the animals talk but Dog, who barks. It's like how, in Disney cartoons, the dog Goofy wears clothes and talks, but another dog, Pluto, doesn't, and barks. Some things you're just meant to accept.

The pilot episode, "Runaway O," is about the O in B-O-X, which escapes and starts rolling throughout Word World. The goal is to get very young viewers to recognize, and think about, the letter O - making this first installment of "Word World," if you will, an O-brainer.

Another clever feature of "Word World" has words turning, on cue, into the things they describe: a tuba, a drum and so on. The animation is more static than that of "WordGirl," but in some ways, it's more suited to its given task.

"WordGirl," which premieres today at 4:30 p.m. (WNET-Ch. 13), is about Becky, who has a secret identity as WordGirl, who came from the planet Lexicon with her intelligent space-monkey companion. As she's described by one character in the opening show, "She's a pint-sized powerhouse who enjoys reading, decorating her dollhouse and pulverizing those who stand in the way of justice."

Plots have a way of forcing WordGirl into duels of wits, where the largest vocabulary wins. It's smart - as is a feature where real kids are interviewed about their favorite word, and animated, in a simpler, sort of "Creature Comforts" approach. All in all, it succeeds in having fun with words, and therefore is commendable. Praiseworthy. Ebulliently received.

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