

Aron Ryan
MAYL810
Review 1 Picture Book

McGinty, Alice B. *Bathe the Cat*. Illustrated by David Roberts. Chronicle Books, 2021. 3-5 yrs.

Mop the fishes. Sweep the dishes. These are perfectly normal chores – at least, according to the cat in the picture book *Bathe the Cat*. Aside from the cat, this story features Daddy, Dad, Bobby, Sarah, and quite simply, the baby. In a race against time before Grandma Marge arrives, Daddy rearranges the magnet letters on the fridge, delegating the chores. “Mop the floor. Scrub the dishes. Vacuum the rug. Feed the fishes. Mow the lawn. Sweep the mat. Rock the baby. Bathe the cat” (5).

One look at the cat says it all. One eye wide open. One eye twitching. This cat does *not* want a bath. With a turn of the page, an orange paw rearranges the magnet letters, respelling the chores. “Sarah, feed the floor. I’ll sweep the dishes. Bobby, rock the rug. Dad will scrub those fishes” (10-11). Each time the cat rearranges the letters, the chores get more ridiculous, turning a task as mundane as a chore list into gleeful chaos.

Except the chaos never feels chaotic. The chore list reads like a poem, its predictable rhythm and rhyme eliciting a sense of calm. David Roberts’ illustrations strike that same chord. Each character’s clothing shares three distinct

colors – yellow, orange, and pink. This bright warm palette demonstrates unity, tying the family together as they work together to finish chores. Above all else, the absurdity of these chores will hook young readers. Since *Bathe the Cat* is as heartfelt as it is hilarious, it's bound to make a splash at storytime.

It's likewise bound to make a splash in the growing body of LGBTQ+ picture books. As coming out narratives gain much needed ground in children's literature, it's delightful to find stories exploring the broader spectrum of LGBTQ+ personhood. Just as the picture book *Calvin* celebrates a transgender boy finding joy in his fullest self, *Bathe the Cat* celebrates a multiracial queer family finding joy in each other. Even the caught cat and the mopped fishes find their happy ending.

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Review 2 Fiction Book

Booth, Coe. *Caprice*. Scholastic, 2022. Grades 5-8.

Caprice only has one week to choose – Newark or Ainsley. If she starts 8th grade in her hometown Newark, she'll stay with her mom and best friend Nicole. If she accepts the scholarship at Ainsley, she'll move three hours away, reuniting with her friends from the school's Summer Leadership Program. Stuck at this fork in the road, Caprice faces an even more treacherous path – the road behind her. When Grandma goes to the hospital, her estranged family gets pulled back together. Caprice gets pulled back into the past, remembering the sexual abuse she survived at four years old. Her uncle said to keep it a secret. She's only ever told these secrets to her poetry journal.

“sometimes i wish i could

talk

explain

tell

what happened

to me

a long time ago

so it's not inside

filling me up” (54).

It’s not just a choice between Newark and Ainsley. It’s a choice between keeping his secret and speaking her truth. By using first person narration, Caprice takes ownership of her choices and her survivorship story.

It’s not the only part of her story. Although her trauma impacts her, it doesn’t define her. Caprice is a full person. She’s a dedicated student. Loving daughter. Loyal friend. Budding poet. The tension of the story lies in the rift between her “normal” life (54) and the four-year-old girl who ran away from home. Between staying silent and speaking out.

The book jacket, illustrated by Reniké, captures this duality. On the front cover, a young black girl holds her head high, staring the reader dead in the eye. Look closer. In her eyes are silhouettes of a much younger girl. On the back cover, this little girl descends a flight of stairs, foreshadowing her journey into Uncle Raymond’s basement. Blue flowers dominate the white space, mirroring the blue paint and flower bedspread of Grandma’s bedroom. The past surrounds her.

Nonetheless, she holds her head high. Caprice’s courage will inspire readers to speak up and speak out for others and for themselves.

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Review 3 Poetry Book

Bulion, Leslie. *Spi-ku: A Clutter of Short Verse on Eight Legs*. Illustrated by Robert Meganck. Peachtree, 2021. Grades 2-6.

In this science poetry collection, the world of spiderkind is explored through a delightful web of art, verse, and science. Rather than exploring spiders solely by species, the collection is organized by topic. Each topic includes informational paragraphs, poems starring spiders well suited for each topic, and illustrations of these spiders. For example, “Spiders on the Move” features 3 spider species moving across the pages (12-13). The golden wheel spider kicks up sand as they roll down the page. Each tiny grain is meticulously illustrated, encapsulating the spider’s movement (13).

Robert Meganck’s illustrations bring each spider to life by blending anthropomorphism and realism. The spiders feature human-like eyes, bringing a cartoonish playfulness to the spiders. At the same time, these illustrations realistically emphasize each spider’s most memorable features. The Goliath Bird-Eating Spider takes up an entire page, emphasizing the spider’s size (25). The Tiger-Wandering Spider’s hair is vividly textured, emphasizing how they use their hair to touch-taste their environment (22).

Although the illustrations and the information respectively show and tell the story of a spider, the poetry encapsulates the spirit of a spider. Leslie Bulion utilizes a blend of free verse and closed forms to create concise, playful poems. Concrete poetry demonstrates how a Green Ant-Hunter Spider waves their front legs to scare off predators (21). Two-voice poetry captures a conversation between a Featherlegged Orbweaver and a hummingbird thief (27). Capturing the process of molting, Bulion includes the following cinquain: “comfy / on her silk pad / tarantula bursts her / tight exoskeleton and splits— / all’s swell!” (11). By adding two syllables with each new line, Bulion masterfully builds momentum as the tarantula molts. By dropping down to two syllables in the final line, Bulion celebrates the tarantula breaking free of their molt.

By weaving together poetry, art, and science, *Spi-ku* celebrates the biodiversity of spiderkind. Just as Nic Bishop captures the life of spiders through the art of photography in *Spiders*, Leslie Bulion brings spiders to life through the art of poetry. Whether read on the page or read aloud, it’s as informative as it is delightful.

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Review 4 Graphic Novel

Smith, Niki. *The Golden Hour*. Hachette, 2021. Grades 4-8.

“When the world feels unstable, find an anchor” (29). Manuel Soto, a 5th grade student, uses photography as an anchor whenever he relives the past. After witnessing an act of gun violence at school, Manuel experiences flashbacks, nightmares, and dissociation. With the help of his friends, mother, therapist, and camera, Manuel learns how to find his focal point when reality gets blurry. Whether he’s taking a photo of a newborn calf, a pair of shoes, or “the fanciest, weirdest chickens you’ve ever seen” (58), Manuel learns how to go back to art class in the same classroom as the shooting.

When Manuel remembers this shooting, the color is sapped out of the page. The background goes black. The characters are sketched in grey and white, breaking out of their outlines as the memory breaks to the surface. The only color is gold. Yellow lines race across the page like bullets firing in a classroom, in a field, or wherever Manuel happens to remember what happened. Niki Smith’s art offers a striking visual representation of posttraumatic flashbacks. This art also tells the story of Manuel’s life outside his PTSD. When he’s taking photos in his rural town, he finds the same gold in a wheat field or a sunrise.

Just as gold can be terrifying or breathtaking, the book's title carries its own double meaning. Per the book jacket, golden hour is "a photography term for the period of daytime shortly after sunrise or before sunset." Golden hour is also the first hour after a traumatic injury. Niki Smith addresses this trauma in the nuanced way she tells the story. The shooting doesn't only affect Manuel. His mother struggles with anxiety after the shooting, yet strives to support Manuel. Manuel also finds support in his friends Caysha and Sebastian. The budding romance between Manuel and Sebastian is as sweet as it is sensible. Rather than serving as each other's anchor, they help each other find their own anchors, avoiding the pitfalls of rescue narratives in favor of mutual support. All in all, *The Golden Hour* is a wonderfully supportive story for anyone looking for an anchor.