

8-12-2021

Middle school kids find their way

"Flight of the Puffin"

Ann Braden

Nancy Paulsen Books, 2021

This book, like its predecessor "The Benefits of Being an Octopus," is about middle school children who are out of place in the worlds they're forced to inhabit. There are four of them, of whom two live in Vermont: Lilly, a tough but talented artist living in a family locally known as bullies, and Jack, whose 5-year-old brother Alex was killed in an accident the previous year. The other two live in Seattle: Vincent, whose intellectual interests and small stature make him a bullying target for the class toughs, and T, who is sleeping in Seattle's streets for reasons that gradually become clear. Over a period of six weeks, the four kids connect with each other, improbably but wonderfully, via index-card pictures and messages Lilly has sent out, and they offer each other the support and understanding they need to assert firmly that they are who they are.

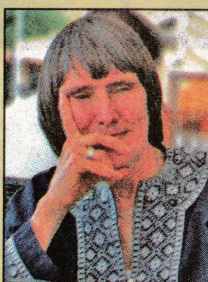
The book's message—that intolerance creates terrible difficulties for the young, and that parents need to let their children be who they are instead of forcing them to conform to "standard" gender models—is movingly made. The delight of the book, however, lies in Braden's skillful portrayal of the four kids. Three of four first-person narratives perfectly capture the agonies of 13-year-olds trying to find their way. The voice of Libby, the instigator of the index-card post cards with inspirational messages (Impossible = I'm possible; or Fly free! We're right behind you) perfectly catches her mixed feelings about being suspended at school and grounded at home; while she's sorry for her mistakes (she really shouldn't have hit the girl who was bullying her), punishment slides off her back—except in the moments she wishes her mom would love her. Jack, on the other hand, is a good kid from a warm, conservative, patriarchal family; he's helpful at the tiny school in his village, he's patient with the younger kids, who remind him of his

dead little brother—and he's convincingly helpless when his well-meaning comment about his school suddenly leads him far out of his depth. On the other side of the country, Vincent, the mathematical son of a single mom who wants him to be artistic, alternately intellectualizes the locker room bullying he's receiving, flees in tears from the bullies, and, in a brilliantly written passage, reflects that he may not be a worthy follower of his role models, Clark Kent and

Katherine Johnson. They may not have fit in, but they flew, whereas he doubts his talents: "What if I'm just a boring, nerdy boy who sees triangles and who's always about to get stuffed into a locker—and nothing else." Later, after he has run away from T's dog, he suddenly realizes T had helped him previously. He's horrified—not at his cowardice, but at the cruelty of turning away from T, who so obviously needs help. Instead of continuing to his classes, he goes home in tears: "Because

if I can't face myself, how could I possibly face the kids at school?" The most intellectual and (in his way) mature of the book's characters, Vincent is the first to accuse himself of participating in the unthinking injustice all four kids endure; his compassionate friendship with depressed, despairing T is a turning point not only in his life, but in the other kids' lives.

The puffins who fly through this fine book are birds who, after spending eight months floating alone in the harsh environment of northern oceans, come back together in nesting season and enjoy the company of "hundreds and hundreds of puffins just like them." They are perfect metaphors for kids whose schools or homes present them with a harsh environment, and who long for the company of people like themselves. Puffins also appear on the stamps with which, thanks to Libby, the four kids offer each other support and understanding they haven't received previously. Though the book is ostensibly written for middle schoolers, it is also a plea for adults to pay attention to the true nature of their children, and to appreciate them as they are.



One-Minute Book Reviews

Laura Stevenson