

Book Reviews: Kids can learn about friendship with these funny and insightful stories

by Various UT Authors

Children love to read about friendship woes and triumphs. These new books showcase the importance peers have in the lives of all kids.

"Hello, My Name is Bob" by Linas Alsenas; Scholastic Press; 32 pages; \$16.99.

Bob, a mellow bear who likes to sit alone in empty parking lots, is quiet. Jack is the opposite: a surfing, dancing, bright color-wearing panda bear. It seems implausible that the pair could be friends, and young children may be surprised to find out that they are, indeed, best pals.

Droll humor abounds as Bob explains his likes — counting toothpicks and humming — and Jack's wacky endeavors — karate, playing in a rock band, hot air ballooning. But they make it work, as "boring" Bob says. How? Jack takes Bob to his favorite places and Bob takes Jack to his. Hilarity ensues as Bob cowers on an amusement park ride with Jack, or when Jack does skateboard tricks while Bob sits and watches in an empty parking lot.

Preschoolers should enjoy meeting this pair of unlikely pals; they may be prompted to strike up conversation with someone different. They'll also laugh when they discover that active Jack is indeed boring at times, "especially when he falls asleep."

"3 Willows: The Sisterhood Grows" by Ann Brashares; Delacorte Press; 336 pages; \$18.99.

Readers around the world have embraced Brashares' fantastic "Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants" series. Her latest introduces a new group of girls about to enter South Bethesda High School, the same school the original "Sisterhood" attended. The new girls — Polly, Jo and Ama — are just as interesting and real as the girls before them, with sights on glamorous lives, being cool and boys.

The summer before high school looms large for them, as one spends the summer at her family's beach house, one lands unwillingly on a wilderness trip and one struggles to lose weight and make some changes. Girls ages 12 and up will fall for "3 Willows" as well as the friendship dramas and bonds it presents.

"Stinky" by Eleanor Davis; Toon Books; 40 pages; \$12.95.

Graphic books are all the rage. Series such as "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" are introducing young children to the pleasures of comic book-style reading, and Davis' "Stinky" is one of the newest and brightest of the genre.

With plenty of color and funny vintage-look illustrations, "Stinky" is the tale of a purple monster who loves pickles and possums but is afraid of children. Stinky assumes kids don't like gross, messy swamps; he is certain that the boy who builds a treehouse nearby will leave if Stinky hides his baseball cap and hammer. Nick, however, has other plans, befriending Stinky's toad friend Wartbelly and embracing all things smelly and gross.

Readers will love that the pair end up meeting and being pals. The book's humor and retro look should also appeal to kids ages 6 to 11.

Toon Books, a new label published by Francoise Mouly and Art Spiegelman, is one of the first lines of hardcover comics written specifically for emergent readers. A smart way to keep visual literacy in kids' books as they become better readers, comics can also hook reluctant readers in ways text-only books don't. Interested? Check out Toon Books' complete line of tales at www.toon-books.com.

"Freckleface Strawberry and the Dodgeball Bully" by Julianne Moore; illustrated by LeUyen Pham; Bloomsbury; 38 pages; \$16.99.

Actress Julianne Moore's picture book tales of a red-haired little girl are based on her own memories of childhood, and she admits she's still afraid of dodgeball. In her newest romp, Freckleface discovers that on rainy days the students play dodgeball at her school: "Scary dodgeball. Hairy dodgeball. Very, VERY dodgeball â€” not fun!"

Worse than the game itself is Windy Pants Patrick, who is big, fast and throws the ball too hard, so hard that the gym resonates with sounds like "Thwack! Thwock! and "Aaaaarrggggghhhhh!" Freckleface Strawberry's plan is to stay back and practice "her monster," so she would look like she was dodgeballing. But when she finally does get "boinked," she notices it doesn't hurt and that she isn't scared anymore, thanks to her pretend monster.

Freckleface Strawberry and Windy Pants Patrick end up friendly, playing jungle gym monkeys happily in a game where nobody gets scared.

With a valuable lesson about making friends with the unexpected, Moore's zippy tale meshes with Pham's hilariously friendly illustrations.

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