

CLASS ACTS

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"BEST IN CLASS" with the
CLASS ACTS CHALLENGE!

YEARBOOK

MEET THE AUTHOR

Cammie McGovern is the author of *Say What You Will* and *A Step Toward Falling*. She's also one of the founders of Whole Children, a resource center that runs after-school classes and programs for children with special needs. Cammie lives in Amherst, Massachusetts, with her husband and three children.

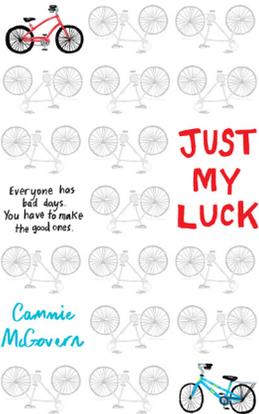


Cammie McGovern
"The Care Captain"

Photo credit: Ellen Aungstien

ABOUT THE BOOK

Fourth grade is not going at all how Benny Barrows hoped. He hasn't found a new best friend. He's still not a great bike rider—even though his brother George, who's autistic, can do tricks. And worst of all, he worries his dad's recent accident might be all his fault. Benny tries to take his mom's advice and focus on helping others, and to take things one step at a time. But when his dad ends up in the hospital again, Benny doesn't know how he and his family will overcome all the bad luck that life seems to have thrown their way.



CLASS CHEER

Kindness is great!
Caring is cool!
Let's be nice
all over this school!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

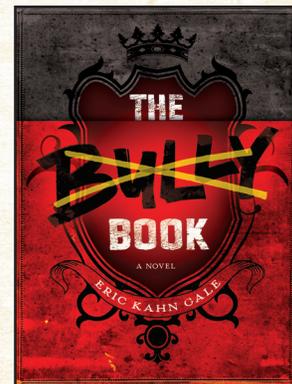
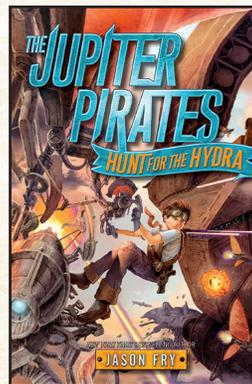
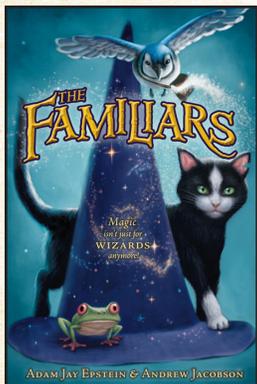
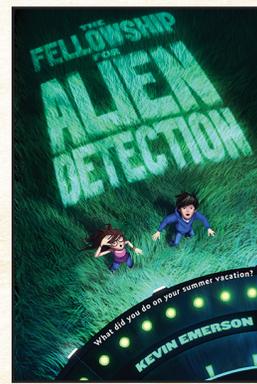
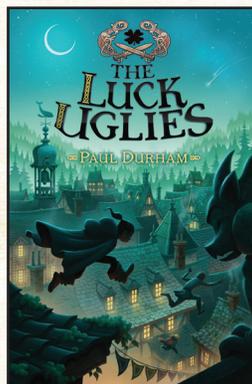
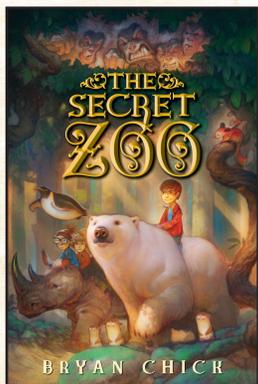
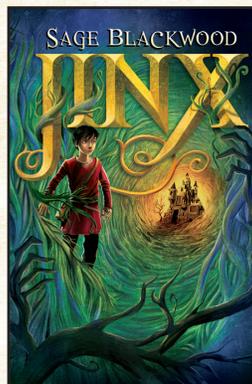
1. At the beginning of the story, Benny shares his mom's theory that "when bad things happen, you should think about someone else's problems." Why is it important to consider others, even when you have problems of your own?
2. Benny struggles with accepting that what happened to his dad wasn't his fault. Is it possible to feel guilty for something, even when it's an accident? How do you think Benny will learn to no longer blame himself?
3. In the first few chapters, what do you learn about Benny's brother George besides the fact he's autistic?
4. Ms. Crocker introduces the CARE program at the school assembly. How do you show your cooperation, accountability, respect, and empathy during and outside of school? In what ways do you work with your classmates to create a caring community?
5. Benny thinks, "We all want to earn footprints and we all want to win the pizza party." Why do you think Benny focuses on the rewards for participating in the CARE program? Do you agree with Benny that everyone is thinking about winning the pizza party?

HARPERCOLLINS PRESENTS

CLASS ACTS

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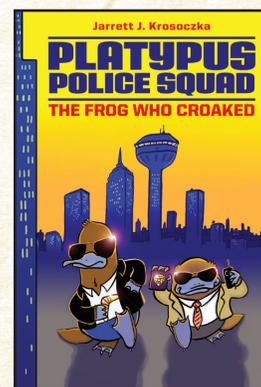
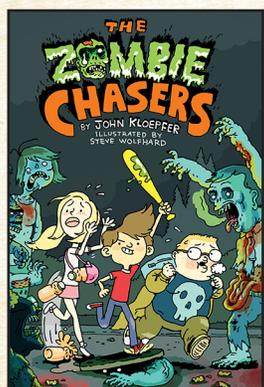
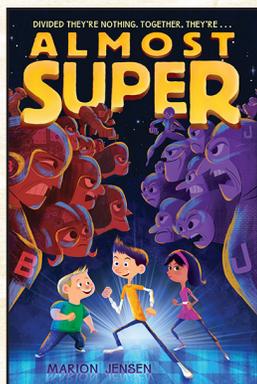
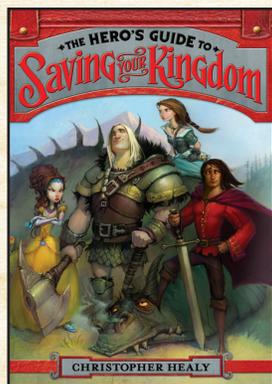
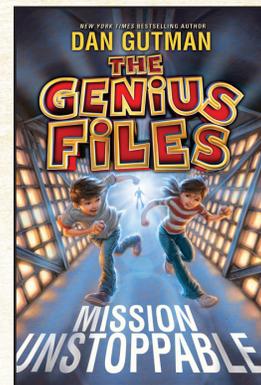
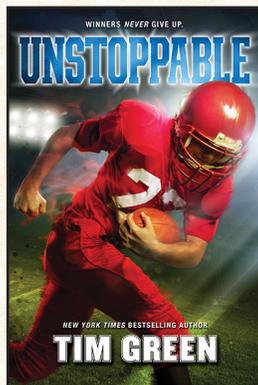
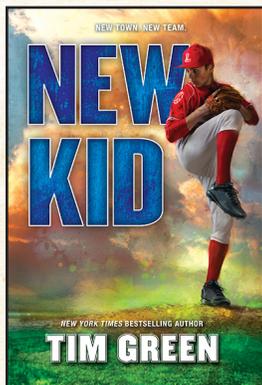
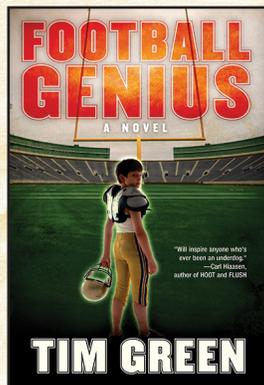


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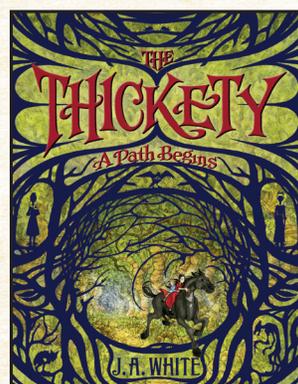
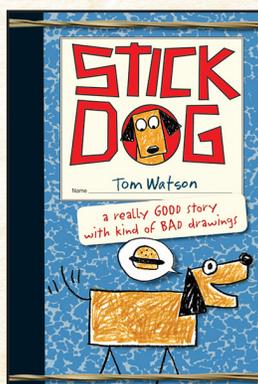
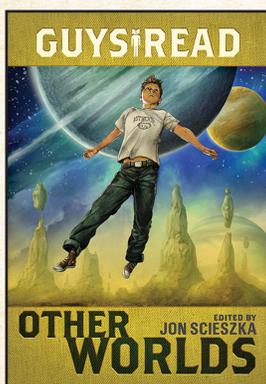
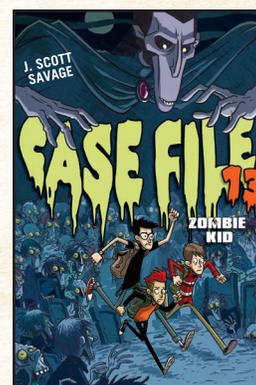
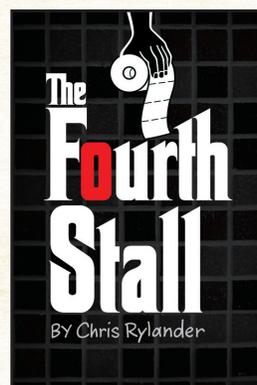
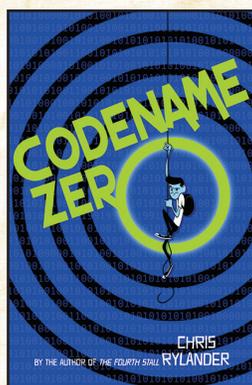
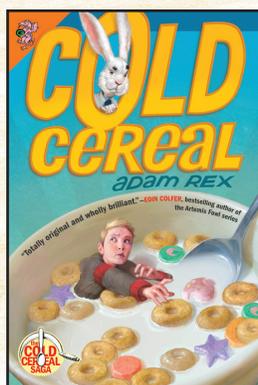
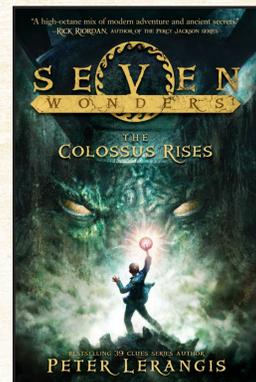
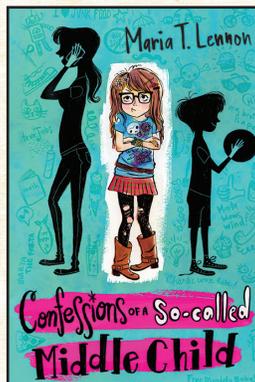
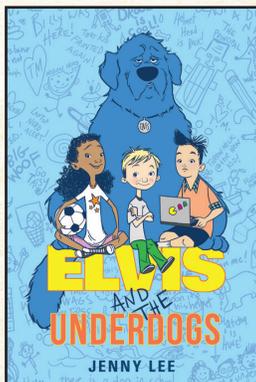
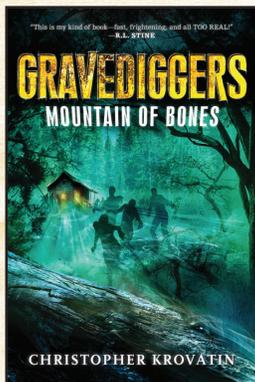
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**JUST
MY
LUCK**

Also by Cammie McGovern

For Teens

Say What You Will

A Step Toward Falling

JUST
MY
LUCK

Cammie McGovern

HARPER

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Just My Luck

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First Edition

*For Ethan, Charlie, and Henry,
who gave me most of the good lines in here*



ONE

MY MOM HAS A THEORY THAT when bad things happen, you should think about someone else's problems and try to help them. Like even if you're losing a soccer game terribly you should try to help the poor guy wearing glasses on the other team who just fell down. Things like that. One problem with Mom's theory is that my older brother George is autistic, which means he can't really think about anyone else, much less help them. The other problem is that ever since this summer and what happened to Dad, I don't think anyone else has more problems than we do.

What happened to Dad this summer wasn't my fault.

The first night that Mom came home from the hospital,

she said this to me, and she's been saying it ever since, which of course makes me feel like it *was* my fault, at least a little bit.

The morning that it happened, Dad asked me if I wanted to go to the high school to work on my bike riding. Which was embarrassing because *I'm in fourth grade now*. Of course I can *ride a bike*. Sort of. I just have a hard time starting. And stopping. It also makes me a little nervous slowing down to make turns.

I wasn't always this way. I could ride a bike when I was in second grade like everyone else. Maybe I kept my training wheels on longer than other kids but eventually I let my dad take them off and I made it up and down the street a bunch of times, Dad jogging next to me, Mom taking pictures. I would have said I was a fine bike rider until the end of that summer when we had a bike parade at our block party. We have twelve kids on our block, most of them younger than us, so every bike was decorated with streamers and pom-poms. Stephanie up the street is a year younger than I am, but she had taped pinwheels to her handlebars, which was such a good idea I was jealous. Especially when I saw how they spun like crazy when she rode fast. All I had for decoration was a few streamers flapping and two balloons tied to

my handlebars, but they weren't doing much. Anyone could see Stephanie's pinwheels were going to win, which made me so mad, I pedaled really hard and fast, *bam!* right into a parked car. I flew into the street and the whole bike parade stopped so everyone could get off their bikes and gather around in a circle to see if I was still alive.

I was. Barely.

Afterward Martin, my oldest brother who's in ninth grade now, kept saying it didn't look that bad. "It was a little funny, actually," he said. "Kind of like a sight gag."

He was trying to make me feel better because it wasn't funny at all.

For a long time afterward, I didn't get on my bike. Even when Martin and his friends built a bike jump out of wood planks and cement blocks, I pretended my foot was hurt so I wouldn't have to do it. When they did races up the street, I would say I heard my mom calling me, so no one would ask why I wasn't racing.

The week before school started this year, Dad called me outside to say he had an idea. "I'm going for a run over at the high school. No one will be there. The track there is a great place to practice riding your bike. No curbs to worry about. No cars to run into . . ."

He clapped his hands like coaches do at halftime when their team is losing.

“I don’t know, Dad,” I said.

I felt bad for him. When he was a boy, Dad went to a prep school where everyone had to wear ties to class and play a sport every season, even if they were terrible at it. “I hated it. I wouldn’t wish that on any of you,” he always tells us, but sometimes I wonder if he wishes his sons were a little more like the jocks he says he never liked.

Dad has been an assistant coach on all of our soccer teams, which means his hardest job every year has been thinking up new words to describe our performance when he hands out end-of-the-season trophies. “Benny has worked so hard with the skills he has,” he’ll say. Or “Benny has been trying to reach a new level of playing. This year he almost has.” He says these things because at trophy ceremonies you’re not allowed to say the truth, which is “Benny hasn’t touched a ball in a game once all season.” He also can’t say, “Benny seems remarkably uninterested in this sport in spite of all the years I’ve put in as an assistant coach.”

I think if Dad had his secret dream come true, he’d have one of us be a surprisingly good athlete so he could stand on the sidelines of games and say, “It didn’t come

from me! I'm a terrible athlete!"

Instead he has my brother Martin, who plays basketball because this year he's the tallest boy in ninth grade, but even Martin will admit he's a terrible shooter and anyone in their right mind doesn't throw the ball to him. He also has George, who plays in Special Olympics basketball, where it's okay to just carry the ball from one end of the court to the other without dribbling at all. And me, Benny, who can only ride a bike if someone is there to help me start and stop.

"I don't think that sounds like such a good idea, Dad," I told him after he suggested bike riding at the high school track. I don't know if he realized this, but I hadn't ridden my bike once since the bike parade. I'd *walked* my bike places, and when I got there, I *pretended* I'd rode, but I hadn't actually gotten on my bike and pedaled it since my crash.

"It'll be fun," Dad said. "I'll be right there. Running my laps."

The way he said this, I could tell that he *did* know that I hadn't been on my bike in two years. Mom came outside and they looked at each other like they'd talked about it ahead of time. Like they were both really worried about this, which made me feel *terrible*.

"Okay," I said. "I guess I could try."

Mom hugged me right away. “That’s wonderful, Benny! We’re so proud of you!”

That afternoon, we got out to the track early while it was still deserted, which was lucky because it turned out that I was even worse than I remembered. Walking over, Dad told me there was an old saying about how you have to get right back on your bike when you fall off. “Or maybe that’s a horse,” he said. “But the point is you shouldn’t wait a year to get back onto whatever you fell off of.”

That was a nice idea, except the first time I tried pedaling, I veered right off the track and onto the grass. I don’t know if this is true for other people, but whenever I fall off my bike, I’m always sure, for about thirty seconds, that I’ve broken my leg. There are so many bars that could crush a leg that I can never believe it hasn’t happened.

I lay there for a while, looking up at sky, waiting to experience what a broken leg feels like. *It’s okay*, I told myself. *If it’s broken, I won’t have to ride this stupid bike again for a long, long time.*

Then came the bad news.

“Looks like you’re okay!” Dad said. “Good to go! Right back in the saddle!” He leaned over. His face was a little red from the effort of staying upbeat. “You’re okay, right?”

“I think so.”

“Super! Why don’t I hold the seat while you start pedaling?”

It’s embarrassing to be nine years old and have your dad hold your bike seat while you climb on. It’s also embarrassing to have him run beside you screaming, “You’re veering! You’re veering! Make your adjustment!”

But here was the surprise: once I got going, I was fine!

Better than fine! I flew around the track, lightning fast.

I made it around one whole lap while Dad watched me, clapping and cheering. He was right—the track was a great place to practice. I didn’t have to worry about running into anything except painted lines on the ground. I got my speed up and practiced staying in between two lines, which was hard, so I gave myself two lanes, which wasn’t hard at all.

I couldn’t believe how good I was, especially compared to Dad, after he started jogging. Dad didn’t really run laps. He shuffled at this strange pace where his legs looked like they were running but old women walked faster. “It’s not about speed,” he always said, which in his case was certainly true. He looked like he was running backward compared to me.

Poor Dad had to sweat and huff and shuffle to get around the track three times and I lost count after ten. I felt great,

like maybe I should become a professional bike rider. Then I saw a woman up ahead on the track, running with her dog. The dog was on a leash, but he liked the inside lane and she liked the outside lane so there was a line stretched like a fence across the track. If I ran into that line, I was sure it would chop me in half, which made me panic and forget how to stop.

I stuck both legs out and yanked the hand brakes, which meant I didn't slow down gradually. My bike stopped but my body didn't. I flew headfirst over the handlebars. I saw the ground, then the sky, then nothing at all.

At the last minute I guess my dad came up behind to help me. His head hit my helmet. Or maybe my head hit his shoulder and he fell back and hit the track. We never figured out exactly what happened. When we got up, a little dazed, he seemed fine. He was more worried about me.

He walked my bike back to the car and drove us home, where he had me lie down on the sofa while he looked up the signs of a concussion, because even though there are three boys in our family, none of us is athletic enough to have ever gotten one.

“Do you feel like throwing up?” he called from his office, where the computer is.

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you feel dizzy or confused or lethargic?”

“What’s lethargic?”

“Tired.”

“Sort of.”

“Do you have double vision or a vague feeling of malaise?”

“What’s that?”

“Feeling gloomy.”

“A little,” I say.

Then—this part is hard for me to think about—while he was still asking my symptoms and reading about concussions on the screen, he slid out of his chair and hit the floor with a thud. I will never forget that sound even if I try to for the rest of my life. Mom heard it, too, and ran into the room. When she couldn’t wake him up, she called out for Martin to please call 911.



TWO

SINCE THEN, I'VE BEEN TRYING TO think of other people who might have worse problems than we do. For instance, this week I've been wondering if maybe my teacher, Mr. Norris, has problems. Over the summer I was so happy when I found out I was getting Mr. Norris. Out of three fourth grade teachers, he's the one everyone wants because he's funny and dresses a little like one of the kids. He wears jeans and sandals and has curly hair he sticks pencils in and then forgets about. The first few weeks of school he was great. He brought in snacks he'd baked at home using ingredients we were supposed to guess. Usually it was a hidden vegetable like carrots or zucchini. Once he brought in beet bars that he said tasted like brownies, and we all said that

was true even if it wasn't. But we didn't care if his snacks didn't taste good. We ate them anyway and acted like they were great. Once Amelia asked for his recipe and then we all asked for it, not because we wanted to make his bars at home but to get our own index card with his handwriting all over it.

Now I realize that's the biggest problem with a teacher like Mr. Norris. Everyone wants him to like them best. Which means Jeremy Johnson—who I have to be best friends with this year because Kenneth, my old best friend, moved to Florida last year—memorizes everything Mr. Norris says to him. The first week of school Jeremy told me, “Mr. Norris thinks I'll probably be in the top math group. Same with spelling. I told him I usually am.”

I'm terrible at math and spelling. During the second week, each of us sat alone with Mr. Norris and answered questions so he could figure out which group we belonged in. Judging by what Jeremy said, he aced all his tests.

To me, Mr. Norris just said, “Thanks for trying your best, Benny,” which is what teachers say to the kids who get put in slow groups.

Now we've been in the fourth grade for a month and a half, working hard to win compliments from Mr. Norris,

but in the last few weeks, I've been wondering if maybe Mr. Norris has a problem. I think about what my mom used to say and wonder if there's some way I might help him.

This whole last week, he's come in late every morning with no pan of baked goods. Today, halfway through math, he realized he hadn't taken attendance or sent the lunch list to the main office. "I'm sorry," he said when a messenger from the main office stopped by for the list. "Seems like I'm late with everything these days."

It's true, I thought. It's hard to explain why he'd be coming to school late when he lives in an apartment complex next door to school. Once at recess he showed us the path he walks to school and said, "Look! No traffic!" Except lately he doesn't walk on his no-traffic path, he drives his car, which is covered in bumper stickers about the importance of recycling and energy conservation.

Jeremy doesn't think this is strange, but I do.

"Doesn't walking conserve more energy?" I say at lunch. "He only lives about two hundred yards away."

"Not if he's running late."

"So why is he always running late?"

"Because maybe he sleeps in. Maybe he's up late playing video games," Jeremy says.

We know he lives alone in his apartment because Charlotte once asked if he was married and he said, “Ah, no. No, I’m not, Charlotte.”

The girls thought he sounded sad when he said this and now they want him to wait for them to grow up so they can marry him. The boys don’t see his life as sad. We know he has a PlayStation even though he’s never mentioned having children, which means he must live the life we all dream of someday, where he can come home from school, eat what he wants, and play video games all night if he feels like it. Which must be great, except lately it seems like maybe it’s not.

When I remind Jeremy how Mr. Norris has been late to everything, Jeremy thinks about it and admits he’s noticed a few things, too. Like Mr. Norris closing his eyes during Shoshanna’s oral book report on *When Zachary Beaver Came to Town*. We’re supposed to pick out a theme to talk about in our oral book reports. Supposedly Shoshanna’s a really good reader—she always reads thick books, at least—but that day I wondered if maybe she missed something. “The main theme of this book is that Zachary Beaver is really fat,” Shoshanna said. “Fatter than any of us will ever be.”

I looked over at Mr. Norris to see if he would say anything

and realized he wasn't closing his eyes to listen better, *he was asleep.*

After a while, even Shoshanna noticed and stopped doing her book report. "Mr. Norris?" she said.

Nothing.

"*Mr. Norris?*" she said again.

Still nothing. I started to panic a little. After this summer, I've learned that bad things can happen really fast. I wondered if someone could die sitting up. A few other people must have thought the same thing, because eventually Seamus held up his hand in front of Mr. Norris's mouth. "Still breathing," he whispered.

We all looked at one another. No one knew what to do. It was like being alone in the house after your parents have left but before the babysitter comes over. You could do anything at all, you just can't think of what.

"That was weird," Jeremy says now, finishing up his lunch. "You might be right. Something freaky is going on with Mr. N."

I lean across the table and tell Jeremy, "I want to figure out what it is." I almost tell him I have some ideas from clues I've noticed, but before I can say what they are, Jeremy's attention has drifted to the stage in our cafetorium.

Our principal, Mr. Wilder, and our assistant principal, Ms. Crocker, are setting up a presentation. There's a bright green poster with a yellow footprint that has *One Footprint at a Time* written on it. They unroll another banner that says *We Are a Community of Helpers* and tape it to a table behind the podium.

Poor Ms. Crocker is terrible at getting things like duct tape to work right. First it sticks to her hands, then to her shirt.

Before Mr. Norris came along, Ms. Crocker was the adult I loved most at school. She wears her blond curly hair piled up like a messy bird's nest on top of her head. The first time I saw Ms. Crocker, she was wearing finger cymbals at the kindergarten welcome circle. She pinged them together until everyone was quiet and then she leaned over her lap and whispered, "I think people hear better when I whisper, don't you?"

No one said anything. We were too busy listening.

After lunch, there's an all-school assembly, which means the tables get pushed back and everyone sits on the floor in rows. We're supposed to sit youngest up front, but in the middle we always get mixed up. Today, my brother George's class sits in front of us even though I'm in the fourth grade

and he's in sixth. George is what my mom calls "medium-functioning autistic," which means he isn't high functioning and he isn't low functioning. He can talk, for instance, but a lot of what he says doesn't make much sense. He's a big one for repeating lines that people have said earlier in the day. When he sees me at assembly, he says, "No more water, silly boy."

"Hi, George," I say.

He turns around on the floor to do a new joke I started at home where I brush my teeth with my finger. To be honest, it's not that funny, but this week it's really cracking George up. George is the only one in my family who still laughs at stupid little jokes like this.

He rubs his finger over his teeth to get me to do it.

"No, George," I whisper. "We have to pay attention."

I point to the stage where Ms. Crocker is trying to get her microphone to work. "Can you hear me?" she says. Or at least that's what it sounds like she says. We can't really hear her.

"Turn around!" I tell George. "You'll get in trouble."

He laughs and rocks back and forth, holding his knees. He won't turn around until I brush my teeth with my finger, so I do it quickly.

He laughs so hard he falls over and the girl sitting next to him has to help him up. “You shouldn’t laugh so hard, George,” she says. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

George doesn’t really have any friends. Instead he has a few girls who act like his mother and tie his shoelaces for him, even though he’s in sixth grade. I don’t think he likes them that much, but I’ve never really been sure.

Finally Ms. Crocker gets the microphone to work when Mr. Wilson shows her how to turn it on. She tells us this assembly is about an exciting new program called C.A.R.E. She points to a poster that has a period between each letter, which usually means it stands for something else. I’m right, it does: Cooperation. Accountability. Respect. Empathy.

Ms. Crocker tells us that deep down in our hearts, each of us has these qualities, but sometimes we forget to show them in everyday ways like bending over to pick up litter or lending someone a pen. “Here’s the idea,” she says. “For two months teachers and staff will be watching you and whenever they see you doing nice things that show your empathy and compassion, they’ll write it down on little paper footprints. One step at a time, we’ll post these random acts of kindness so everyone can see what a caring community looks like. And because this is all about working together,

the class with the most footprints at the end of two months will win a pizza party!”

It’s hard to tell, but it seems like maybe this is an idea Ms. Crocker really wanted to do and Mr. Wilson, our principal, didn’t. She keeps looking at him nervously while she talks. I know how she feels. Mr. Wilson scares all of us, even though he has a hard time remembering our names and usually calls you “son” if he yells at you in the hall.

Ms. Crocker remembers our names and which buses we ride on, which means everyone likes her almost as much as I do and everyone claps for her C.A.R.E. idea. Ms. Crocker’s other problem (besides duct tape and Mr. Wilson) is that sometimes she tries a little too hard, like she does at the end of the assembly when she has us all sing a song with the words on a screen under a bouncing ball.

We show compassion and empathy!

Deep down in our hearts!

We show kindness and cooperation!

Deep down in our hearts!

I said DEEP, DEEP!

I said DOWN, DOWN!

I said deep down in our hearts!

It's not a very good song and it goes on for way too long. Even Ms. Crocker realizes this about halfway through because she laughs and says into the microphone, "All right, people, let's just get through this."

By the end, I'm pretty sure everyone loves Ms. Crocker as much as I do.

Which means we can't help it, we all want to earn footprints and we all want to win the pizza party.