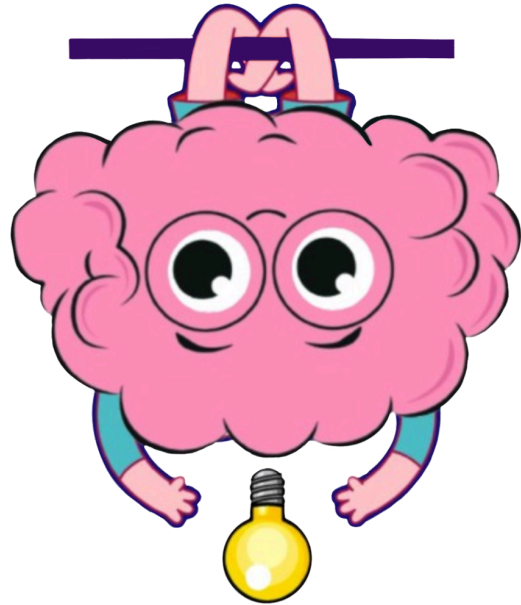


# Nimblewitlit



Issue 2

Editors-in-Chief: Melissa Rotert and Kristin Houlihan

Fiction Editor: Melissa Rotert

Poetry Editor: Kristin Houlihan

Outreach Editor: Emma Perry

Nimblewitlit Magazine is published digitally several times a year exploring themes to celebrate a variety of perspectives and advancing relationships through interpersonal understanding. Continuing the conversation with a young audience, we believe children should never be left out of the conversation as they are not only the future but important members of the current community.

We accept submissions from a diverse population of writers, young and old, as we hope to include the stories and literary perspectives that will expand our communities and bring understanding through the written word. All published work will be archived on [EpistemicLit.com/Nimblewitlit](http://EpistemicLit.com/Nimblewitlit).

Contact us via email at [Nimblewitlit@gmail.com](mailto:Nimblewitlit@gmail.com)

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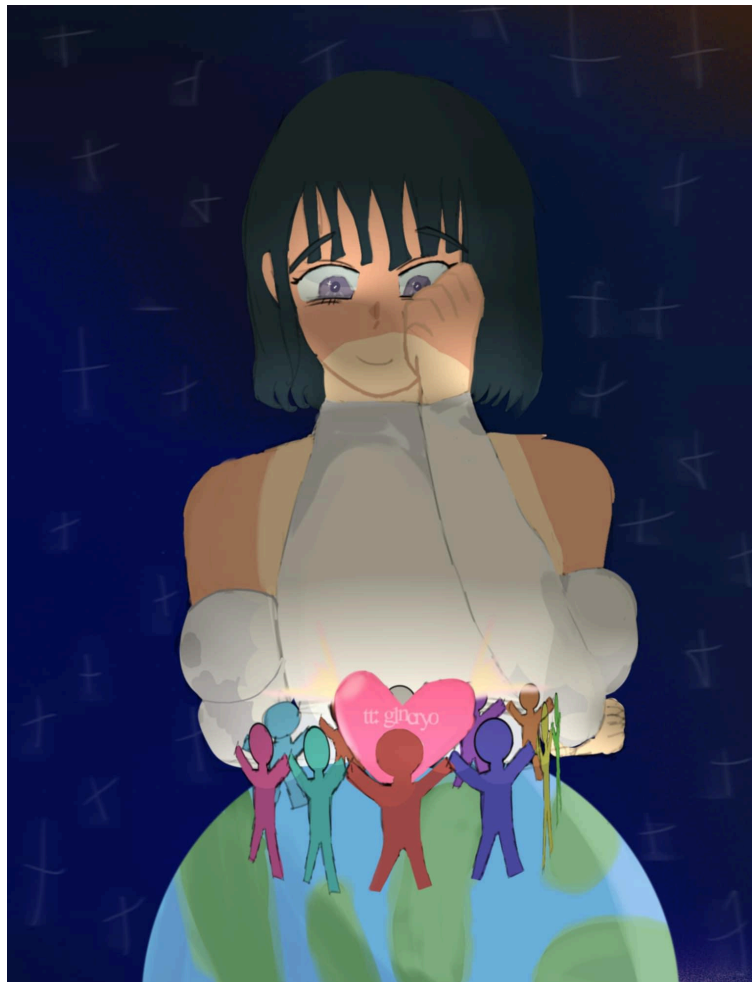
Cover design: Melissa Rotert

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# ISSUE TWO

## Trustworthy

December 1, 2025



Original artwork, Hand in Hand by Lia Filart Dublin (age 13)

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## EDITOR'S NOTE



Original artwork, I Trust You by Theartofpuro

When I consider what it means to be trustworthy, especially as it relates to a younger audience, I often connect it back to the reason we created Nimblewitlit. Kristin and I wanted to give children and teens a voice in a world that so often expects their silence. Growing up hearing adults proclaim that, “children should be seen and not heard,” the rebellious spirit of my own youth wanted to scream out about the things that mattered to me—with no concern for whether or not the adults wanted to hear it.

So what does this have to do with trust? As children, we expect the adults in our lives to provide physical and emotional safety, to listen to our needs, to care for and take care with our feelings. This is a relationship of trust. The most important of our lives and one that we carry with us to each and every relationship we form.

And for those who don't feel heard? We give you space to scream out and demand the world listen!

We at Nimblewitlit hear you.

Join us [@EpistemicLit](#) and [@Nimblewitlit](#) on Instagram and Bluesky

– Melissa Rotert, Co-founder and EIC, Fiction

## SECRET KEEPER

Written by McLord Selasi

I told you my secret  
and watched your face—  
not a grin, not a giggle,  
not even a wiggle.

You zipped it up tight,  
like a backpack pocket.  
Now it rides with you everywhere,  
but never spills out.

That's how I know  
my secret is safe.  
That's how I know  
you're my friend.

McLord Selasi is a Ghanaian writer, poet, public health researcher, and performing artist. His recent works have been accepted for publication in *Panorama*, *Apricot Press*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Shoegaze Literary*, *Trampoline*, *Rough Diamond*, *Isele Magazine*,

*Subliminal Surgery, Eunoia Review, Poetry Journal, Graveside Press, and elsewhere. Tweet him @MclordSela64222*

## A LITTLE THING

Written by Lauri C. Meyers

Sometimes my dog falls asleep  
while I'm petting him.

I watch his blinks slow  
until his eyes close.

It's a little thing.

His legs twitch,  
dream running...

again a wild wolf  
owning the woods,  
surviving on instinct.

Yet—

He lets me rub his belly  
while he sleeps.

Fingertips in his fur,

my eyes close, too.

Lauri C. Meyers writes for children from her little nook in New Jersey. Her poetry has appeared in *Highlights High Five*, *School Magazine*, *Ember*, *Paperbound*, *Little Thoughts Press*, and others. When she isn't writing, she is giving her sweet Shih Tzu belly rubs. You can find her at [www.laurimeyers.com](http://www.laurimeyers.com) or @laurimeyers.



Original artwork, *Dogs Show Love & Care* by Finn Rotert (age 6)

# THE BASKETBALL PASS

Written by Mike Flowers

I trust my friend to help me score.

We've done this court-long pass before.

I take off sprinting down the floor.

Six seconds left—whoops, now it's four!

He lobs the ball, I watch it soar.

I catch it, spin, and shoot—we score!

**Mike Flowers** is a teacher and literacy program coordinator from Marco Island, Florida. He loves spending time with his family, hiking the beach, and writing at every opportunity. Mike participated in the PB Rising Stars Mentorship Program and is excited to keep creating new stories.

## STEPS TO WIN THE RACE

Written by David McMullin

Step 1: Cross the gorge -

One bridge stretches safe and strong.

One bridge shows a lot of rust.

Which one would you trust?

Step 2: Cross a sea -

One boat has a sturdy hull.

One boat looks about to bust.

Which one would you trust?

Step 3: Stop for lunch -

One meal seems a healthy choice.

One meal fills you with disgust.

Which one would you trust?

Step 4: Pass by the volcano -

One is quiet and serene.  
One might suddenly combust.  
Which one would you trust?

Step 5: Balloon across the sky -

One cloud gently floats on by.  
One's a swirling, windy gust.  
Which one would you trust?

Step 6: Strap on a parachute and leap -

One is packed with perfect care.  
One is old and caked with dust.  
Which one would you trust?

Look at that, you won the race!  
Your trophy's on the shelf.  
That's because at every turn,  
you trusted in yourself.

While racing through your awesome life  
there's one thing that's a must ...

make choices that are brave and smart.  
It's YOU you need to trust.

David McMullin's books include FREE TO BE FABULOUS!  
(HarperCollins), ROCK 'N' ROLL BABY (Penguin/Random House),  
and a soon-to-be-announced early reader series. He has poems  
published in several magazines and anthologies. Honors include  
being the 2021 Madness Poetry champion. David is a full time  
world traveler, bird nerd, and YouTuber. Past careers include being  
a Broadway actor and a children's librarian.

# THE TRUST-O-METER

Written by Genesis Pearl

I built a Trust-o-Meter  
from cardboard and tape.  
It measures how trustworthy I am  
in excellent shape.  
It rises when I tell the truth  
about who ate the pie.  
(It was me. I was hungry.  
Better honest than sly.)  
It jumps when I return things  
the way they were lent.  
My friend said  
"You gave it back perfect.  
That is rare. That is meant."  
It dips just a little  
when I forget what I said,  
like promising to feed the hamster  
then going to bed.  
But it bounces back quickly  
when I fix my mistake.

Trust grows again  
every time you choose to remake.  
My Trust-o-Meter is silly  
but it taught me one thing  
being trustworthy grows stronger  
with every choice that you bring.  
And the funny part is  
everyone has one inside.  
You cannot see it or touch it  
but you feel it with pride.

**Jessica Edmond**, writing as **Genesis Pearl**, is a writer and community builder who loves creating stories that help young readers see their own strengths. She enjoys exploring themes of courage, kindness, and imagination and writes to inspire curiosity and confidence. She hopes her work encourages children to trust their voices, believe in their gifts, and dream without limits.



Original artwork, Trustfall by Hannah Houlihan (age 14)

# FLASHLIGHT

Written by Lisa Roullard

Small, like me, it fit  
my hand, the pink plastic  
smooth against my palm.

A thumb-push  
against the ridged sliding switch, click!  
and the light would shine.

All mine!

Yet it came with a rule:  
no playing with it  
outside.

But I did.  
And I dropped it, crack!  
on the concrete. My mom  
spotted the broken corner.

“What happened?” she asked.

My throat tightened. “I

don’t know.” My first lie.

And somehow

she knew it. Scolded,

“How can I

trust you now?” My switch

pushed to a different

place, how could I trust

myself? Little

broken light

that I was.

Lisa Roullard resides in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her family and Onyx the black cat. Her poems for children can be found in *Little Thoughts Press*, *The Toy*, *The Dirigible Balloon*, and *Parakeet*.

## PEOPLE I TRUST

Written by Finn Rotert (age 6)

I trust Harley because she's my friend and she asked me to be her friend and I said yes. She's nice and she cleans up our group's table.

I trust Shawn because we both get along. We got in a fight and then we both said I'm sorry and now we're friends.

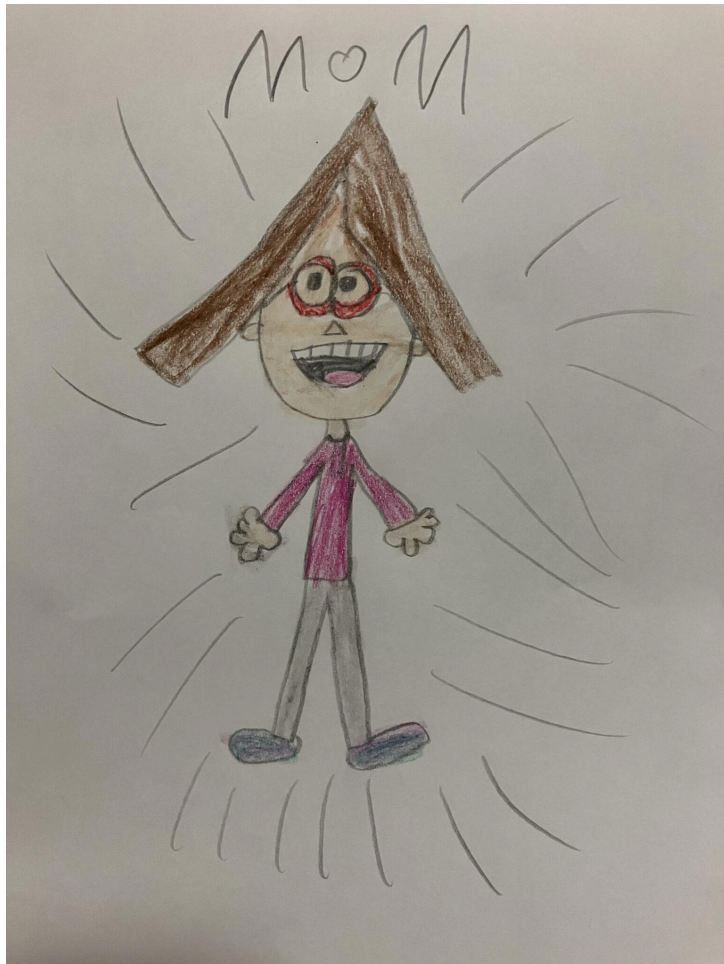
I trust Alaila because she's my reading partner and she reads nicely with me. She's good at listening.

I trust my brother because he helps take care of me. He makes me happy when I see him.

I trust my daddy to keep me safe. He counts on me to do my best.

I trust my dogs Otis and Phu phu. They are always there to play with.

**Finn Rotert** is a first-grade student with a love for reading graphic novels and playing tackle football. *Dog Man* and *Plants vs. Zombies* are two of his favorites. Since his mom is a writer (and editor) she convinced him to try creative writing. This is his second time being featured in *Nimblewitlit*. The first was for his art in the Taking a Stand issue. He was also the Offensive Rookie of the Year this year in football and has won dance, baseball, academic, and swimming awards.



Original artwork, Mom by Abigail Houlihan (age 9)

# POWERUPPLUS

Written by Ian Brownlie

Mitra couldn't be sure when PowerUpPlus appeared on her phone, because who sits scrolling through all their apps every day waiting for something mysterious to appear?

It was nothing she'd consciously downloaded, Mitra knew that much. It sounded ridiculous, like one of those apps that falsely claims to improve gaming performance. When she clicked on it a list of what sounded like powers from a rubbish superhero film appeared.

Huh. Weird.

Mr. Stevens had Mitra's phone for the rest of the day. The blocky red and black layout of the PowerUpPlus app was distinctive enough to catch her teacher's attention. When he gave it back to her Mitra had her socials to catch up on. The new app was pushed to the back of her mind.

A loud notification woke her the next day at 5am.

"Rude," said Mitra, face muffled by her pillow.

PUP Tip of the day: Increase Stamina

Ha! thought Mitra. Nice idea. PE was second period and they

were going for a long run. She hated being with the losers at the back, limping pathetically over the finish line.

She clicked and the blocky red and black screen appeared again. Stamina was now the first option, and it was flashing. She clicked again, curious to find out what it would say next.

A single bar showed twenty seven percent. Was that her stamina level? This app was wild. OK then, thought Mitra. What have I got to lose? She dragged the slider up so the bar was at 100%.

The app immediately switched to camera mode, with shifting red crosshairs:

TARGET...searching...

Mitra blinked, yawning. She tried to cancel out of the screen but it seemed to be stuck. She sighed, already bored, eyelids drooping.

In first period her phone vibrated. After seeing it was from PowerUpPlus she was only glad it hadn't made the same loud noise that woke her.

TARGET...acquired

The crosshairs of the camera focused on Cris Belford. Mitra raised her eyebrows. Cris could run and run. Would the 'target' of the app be used as some kind of guideline by

which her own stamina would be judged? Knowing how unlikely that was made it much easier for Mitra to OK the notification and forget about it.

\*

The run itself felt dreamlike. Mitra started off at a good pace as usual, but rather than rapidly tail-off into a heavy-breathing mass of sprawling limbs and sweat Mitra found she was simply able to remain at that initial level.

She went past Cris at the halfway point, recognising the look of exhaustion on his face as she passed him.

“Good work, Mitra!” called Mrs. Phillips as she finished.

“Thanks, miss,” said Mitra.

“You must have been training hard, well done.”

The reality of what happened during the PE lesson only sank in during break time. Mitra sat ignoring her friends Dina and Stef while they discussed some new school drama, keeping her eyes firmly on Crispin Belford.

Cris was slumped by the door to the toilets, quiet at first, breathing still heavy, before he slowly began to join in his friends’ conversation.

Mitra felt her phone buzz and glanced down to see another PowerUpPlus Tip of the Day recommending that she improve her Hearing. She moved the slider from forty four percent to 100%, this time being told that three targets were required. Yeah, yeah, whatever, thought Mitra, okaying the three chosen students.

Looking over towards Cris, she could now hear every word he and his friends were saying:

"...not the end of the world, is it Cris?"

"We all have bad races, dude."

They were trying to laugh off the issue but without much confidence. They actually sounded a little spooked.

"Guys," said Crispin. "I'm in great shape. I've been training every day for the Championships. It doesn't make sense. A bad race means a bad time, not completely failing to finish."

"Might be coming down with a cold?"

"No," said Cris.

"Someone spiked your water?"

"Not possible," said Cris.

Mitra felt a trembling hand on her shoulder. Her friend Stef did not look at all well; a thin sliver of blood trickled from her ear. She tried to speak, but it was as if she couldn't cope with the pressure, the pain, inside her head.

Two other students in the hall looked as if they were suffering similarly and Mitra got the connection. Reluctantly, she went into PowerUpPlus and slid her hearing back down to forty four percent. She heard no more from Cris, and Stef slowly started to improve.

Mitra's phone vibrated once more before lunch, but she didn't need to look at it. English was next and the last thing she wanted to do was read aloud from King Lear in front of the class. The app would offer to boost her Confidence but confidence wouldn't stop her making mistakes. Even if the app could increase two things at once, she didn't have time to be messing around with it for so long in class. Getting the phone confiscated was now her biggest concern.

"Hey!" called Allie, a girl she rarely interacted with, as they were waking out of the lunch hall. "Hey, you, hold up."

"What?" said Mitra.

"Think you're better than me, yeah?"

"Err, no."

“No? So what’s with the stupid grin on your face as you ran past me this morning?”

“Since when did running fast become a crime?” said Mitra, a little more assertively than she’d meant to.

“Since you laughed at me when you did it,” said Allie. Before Mitra could deny it, Allie shoved her shoulder. “You know EXACTLY what you did.”

“Now now, girls,” said the risk-averse Mr. Dunlop as he moved past them in the corridor. “Enough of that. Onto your next lesson, come on please.”

Allie smiled, biding her time until Mr. Dunlop moved away:

“You and me,” she whispered. “After school. We settle it.”

Mitra watched Allie strut off, gripping her phone tightly. Maybe, she thought, if I just put the level of Strength up to eighty percent rather than a hundred that might be OK? Especially if I’m taking some of it away from Allie. What could be the harm in that?

\*

From a standing position, Mitra leaped from the grass outside the drama block right onto the sports hall roof.

It was dark, so she was fairly sure nobody had seen her. A costume would have made absolutely certain, but...nah, that wasn't happening.

Mitra's legs felt strong and she was sure she could have gone higher. The key, she'd found over the last six months, was using a combination of abilities. Even if you could acquire enough targets to put the Jump slider up close to 100% in PowerUpPlus, you still needed to up the Strength too.

She'd been able to catch ten people in the crosshairs tonight, and the sports centre was maybe twenty metres high. If she was finally going to do some good in this town Mitra needed to get on top of the much larger Grand Majestic Hotel so she could survey the area. Luckily the app would be able to find her more leg strength, more people, in the centre of town.

And yes, that would suck for those people, just like it sucked for Cris Belford (who didn't come into school any more). She couldn't train properly without all that Stamina though, and how else was she supposed to put this magical gift she'd been given to good use?

Mitra checked the app's levels to make sure she could handle the jump back down to the ground. She couldn't risk any broken bones.

This town needed a hero.

Ian Brownlie lives with his family in Marlow, Bucks (UK). His work has been longlisted for the Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition and Searchlight's Best Novel Opening award. He has had children's poetry published in *The Dirigible Balloon*, *Tyger Tyger*, *Little Thoughts Press*, and *The Toy*. His poetry for adults has appeared in *SHINE Quarterly*, *streetcake*, *Audi Locus*, and *Cosmic Daffodil*, and was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize. BlueSky: @ianbrownlie.bsky.social Instagram: @ibrownlie

# SWEETEST SURPRISES IN THE LITTLEST KINGDOM

Written by Joel Glover

If you know about robins you know that they have pretty little faces, and pretty little songs, and tummies as red as a ruby.

If you know about robins you know they think they are the kings and queens of the hedgerow, and that they flutter about full of pride and happiness.

If you know about robins you know they are terrible gossips.

Albert is a robin.

His nest is in the highest branches of an apple tree which gives the sweetest fruit in the whole forest. The apples are bright green, with crispy white flesh, and a ruby red patch on the side. They look as much like a robin as an apple can.

The apple tree is a cheery plant. In the spring she fills the air with the scent of her pink blossoms. In the summer she spreads her branches and bathes in the sunlight. In the autumn her fruit brings joy to all around. And in the winter she naps.

This autumn she knows her crop is going to be particularly excellent.

"My apples are smelling wonderful!" Albert declares.

He believes that all the apples in the tree he lives in belong to him.

Robins are like that.

He is happy to share, of course. Robins are not selfish. And he can't eat them all himself.

"Can I tell you a secret?" asks the tree.

"You can!" says Albert.

Robins love being told secrets.

"This," whispers the tree, using the gentle breeze which wraps around her to rattle her twigs, "is going to be the best autumn ever."

Albert flutters his wings and puffs out his bright red chest.

"The best autumn ever?"

"The sweetest, crispest, tastiest apples," the tree agrees. "The best."

Albert is giddy with delight.

"Would you like to hear a secret?" Albert asks Benny the thrush.

"Of course," Benny says. Thrushes love to hear secrets.

"This year my tree is going to have her sweetest, crispest, tastiest apples ever," Albert whispers.

Benny loves apples. He likes to peck them when they are hanging from their branches, and to pick out any bugs that live on the tree nearby.

"Would you like to hear a secret?" Albert asks Angus the hog.

Angus stops digging with his snout for just long enough to say "yes" before going back to hunting for delicious morsels.

"This year my tree is going to have her sweetest, crispest, tastiest apples ever," Albert tweets.

Angus loves apples. He loves to snuffle them up, one by one, when they fall to the ground beneath a tree. He loves to mix them up with acorns, or truffles, to make a succulent salad.

"Oh, good," Angus sighs happily.

"Would you like to hear a secret?" Albert asks Orsina the bear.

Orsina is in the middle of a mouthful of bees. It might not seem very nice, but it is true that sometimes bears eat a beehive as a snack. Bears are funny beasts, because

although honey is especially yummy, bears mostly eat beehives because they think bees are a very filling snack.

As Orsina finishes her sting-y treat she nods.

“This year my tree is going to have her sweetest, crispest, tastiest apples ever,” Albert chirps.

Orsina growls and grumbles happily.

Apples are a better snack than bees.

Apple pies are even better.

By the time the apples in the tree ripen every animal in the forest has heard the news.

When the day comes for the apples to be picked, flocks of birds and sounders of hogs and all the bears from far and wide make their way into the clearing.

“What are you all doing here?” asks the tree.

Nobody wants to speak first.

Eventually, a pretty little robin called Aimee flits forward.

“Albert told us that the apples this year would be the best apples ever.”

The tree waves her branches sadly, and three leaves turn from an emerald green to amber and fall to the floor.

"Is this true?" she asks.

Albert hears the sorrow in her words and suddenly, for the first time in his whole life, he is ashamed.

"It was a secret," the tree reminds him.

Albert blushes, his cheeks going as red as his belly.

"This is a big crowd," someone says from behind a pair of very hungry looking bears.

"Someone told my secret," the tree replied.

"Oh."

This is Georgi, the wisest woman in the world. She knows how to make a cosy jumper from leaves, how to build a house from wood or bricks, and how to find her way through the forest blindfolded using only the smell of the mosses growing on the trees.

"Well, you can all wait!"

The tiny woman behind Georgi is Catur. She is wearing an apron, because she is a baker and because aprons have very helpful pockets, and a pointy hat covered in stars, because she is a wizard.

Catur makes the very best pastry in the world.

Georgi knows a secret recipe for apple sauce.

The tree was keeping her excellent apples secret so that Georgi and Catur could make the best apple pies anyone had ever tasted. Ever. Ever ever.

It was supposed to be a surprise.

Catur and Georgi were going to throw a huge party on the first day of winter, and invite everyone.

The pies were the secret dessert.

Everybody agreed that apple pies made by a wise woman and a wizard would have been quite a superb surprise.

Georgi looks around at everyone who had gathered to taste the apples.

“Do you all understand why keeping a secret is important, now?” she asks.

“Yes, Georgi,” all the animals reply.

“Albert?” Catur asks.

“Yes, Catur,” the little robin mumbles.

Everybody helps Georgi and Catur to pick the apples. Some are more helpful than others. Pigs, of course, do not have

fingers, they cannot climb, and they can't help eating apples that are handed to them.

Then they have to wait.

The pies, when they are baked and served at the party, are not a surprise. They are delicious, and delightful, and delectable. But they are not a surprise.

"Those pies were very tasty," Albert tells Georgi from a perch on her windowsill.

"Thank you, Albert," says Georgi gracefully.

"They would have tasted sweeter if they were a surprise," admits the robin.

"They would have," agrees the wise woman.

She waits, then, because wise women know that sometimes if you wait long enough then people talk about their feelings.

"I don't think my tree trusts me any more," Albert says sadly.

"Trust has to be earned," Georgi reminds him, "and it can be lost, too."

"That," tweets Albert, "makes me feel sad."

A tiny diamond tear rolls down his little robin face.

Georgi kisses it away, and gives him some of the crumbs of apple pie that she has kept as a secret supply for just such an occasion.

Then she gives Albert another little kiss.

Over the winter, whilst the tree is sleeping, Albert does his best to look after her. He tidies up her fallen leaves, and keeps the ants from nibbling at her too much, and cleans the ivy from climbing up her trunk.

When she wakes up she feels better than ever. Albert sings her a joyful song and dances a happy dance.

And he never, ever, breaks a promise again.

Joel Glover lives in leafy Hertfordshire with two harpists, a violinist, a trombonist, a clarinetist, and a saxophonist. Between listening to music and doing battle with woodland creatures, he writes. This story is set in "The Littlest Kingdom" (the clue is in the name). There are nine other stories set there, including princesses, heroes, wizards, unicorns, talking mice, and a very adorable cat named Ginger Tom. If you liked this, please join the fun on Audible, YouTube, or Amazon.

# THE COIN

Written by Zary Fekete

Tünde Néni smelled like honey lozenges and harsh, hardwater soap. Her fingernails were squared and short, and her eyes didn't soften, even when she smiled.

Every morning in our second-grade classroom in Budapest, she played opera through a small black tape recorder while we unzipped our boots and peeled off scarves. Sometimes it was Verdi, sometimes Puccini, but most often it was Mozart.

"In opera, even dying sounds beautiful," she said once. I didn't know what she meant, but I nodded because I was the American and had already learned it was better to nod.

One Thursday in early December, she announced we would be attending *A Varázsfuvola*...The Magic Flute...at the National Opera. She drew a crude stage diagram on the chalkboard and used little x's to show where we'd be sitting. "You'll need to listen carefully," she said. "Some of the notes will be so high they will scare you if you aren't prepared."

The morning of the performance, we rode a creaking school bus across the Danube. The opera house looked like a shabby wedding cake. Inside, there were chandeliers and velvet ropes and a woman who handed out brass coat tokens

when we gave up our jackets. Tünde Néni pinched one between her fingers like a communion wafer.

“Do not lose these,” she said. “You’ll want your coat later.”

I kept mine in the tiny coin pocket of my jeans.

During the Queen of the Night aria, the soprano’s voice climbed higher than seemed possible, like it was escaping gravity. Around me, other children stirred or leaned forward or whispered. I didn’t move. I turned slightly, just enough to see Tünde Néni in profile, her back straight, hands folded in her lap. Her face was still except for one tear that slipped past her cheekbone and caught on the rim of her glasses.

After, she reminded us to thank the coat check woman.

Years later, I would listen to that same aria on a cassette from the secondhand shop. The sound was tinny and the soprano’s high notes came out like whistles in a kettle. It wasn’t the same.

But I remembered the brass coin and the single tear. I remembered the warmth of my coat when I slipped it back on. And I remembered her voice telling us, very simply, not to lose it.

First published with 3 Panels Press

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary and currently lives in Tokyo. He has a debut novella (*Words on the Page*) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (*The Written Path: A Journey Through Sobriety and Scripture*) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. Twitter and Instagram: @ZaryFekete Bluesky: zaryfekete.bsky.social

# T-REX AND BAT

Created by Ethan Houlihan (age 7)



Ethan Houlihan is a first-grader from California. He loves dinosaurs and wants to be a paleontologist when he grows up. He is very excited to have T-Rex and Bat as his first-ever publication.

# TELLING THE TRUTH

Created by Madelyn Houlihan (age 12)



Madelyn Houlihan is a sixth-grader from California who loves animals, especially cats. She also enjoys stuffies, crafting, and graphic novels. Madelyn volunteers at a farm and is learning to care for animals. This is her first publication.

# TAG

Created by Abigail Houlihan (age 9)

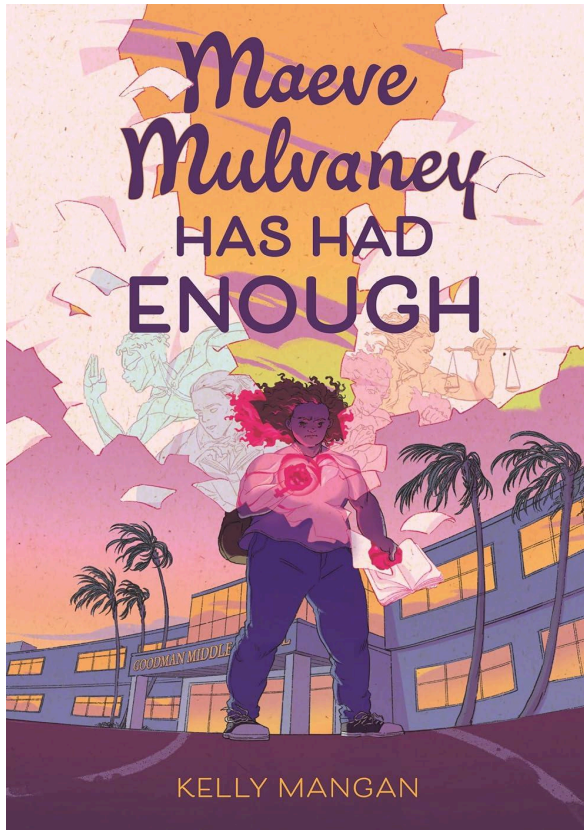


Abigail Houlihan is a nine year old third-grader from California. She wants to be a pop star-ornithologist when she grows up, and her favorite bird is a turkey vulture. This is her first publication.

## INTERVIEW WITH AN AUTHOR: TRUSTWORTHY

### Welcome Kelly Mangan- Author of Maeve Mulvaney Has Had Enough

Maeve Mulvaney goes from “family raincloud” to Feminist Superhero in this upper middle grade novel perfect for fans of Carrie Firestone, Julie Murphy, and Barbara Dee.



Fourteen-year-old Maeve feels more at home in the pages of her comics and sketchbook than she does in “Nowhereville” (her maybe-not-so-nice nickname for the small Florida town where her family just moved). In the comic-book version of her life, she’s a brave superhero who always bests the bad guys. In reality? Not so much.

When a bully at her new school makes her life miserable over her weight (and a sexist teacher defends him), Maeve isn’t sure what to do. Her mom thinks she should just cheer up, brush it off, and stay positive. But then Maeve hears from other misfit eighth graders who are

also being picked on, and she decides that enough is enough.

Drawing inspiration from her comics, Maeve creates a feminist superhero club, hoping she and her new friends can inspire meaningful change in their community. But it turns out, fighting back without becoming the bully yourself is harder than it seems...This heartfelt and uplifting novel serves as a sweet reminder that heroes are stronger together, that home is where you make it, and that the greatest superpower you have is your voice.

## QUESTIONS FROM KIDS

### How long does it take to make a book?

My novel took about 8 years, from the time I first started writing it (re-writing it, and then re-writing it again), through the editing process, to finally finding a publisher who liked my story well enough to publish it. Now that I know what I'm doing a bit more, hopefully my next book won't take quite so long!

### How do you make sure your book is interesting?

I start by making a character I think I would've related to when I was that age, and then I put them in a MESS OF TROUBLE! When you like a character, you feel invested in what happens to them. I've watched shows and movies before where I couldn't stand the main character, so even though there was exciting stuff happening in the stories, I was kinda like "Meh, I don't really care." Make your reader care!

**Practical tip:** End your chapters in a way that always leaves the reader wanting a little more. Not a full-blown cliff hanger, per se, but you can definitely dangle some unanswered questions over the edge. Or you could end the chapter immediately after a big reveal. Leave the reader going "WHAT?! Now I HAVE to turn the page to find out what happens!"

### Why did you want to be an author?

When I was a kid, my family always gathered around my grandparents' kitchen table and told stories. Funny stories. Sad stories. Outrageous stories. So I guess that story-telling tradition rubbed off on me. It's the best feeling in the world, though: telling someone a story and making

them laugh, or gasp, or cry, or question something they used to think. The very idea that we can make some marks on paper and share our feelings, experiences, and knowledge with other humans? That's sort of magical when you think about it. I love making art for the exact same reasons.

### How do you write so awesome?

Wow. I don't know if my writing is awesome, but thank you so much for the compliment! Hard work is the true-but-unfun answer.

I like to think of writing stories like testing out a new recipe in the kitchen. A friend said once that first drafts of stories are like assembling the ingredients for baking a cake. You wouldn't eat a big spoonful of flour and go "Why does my cake taste like poop?" Well, it turns out that second, third, fourth, fifth, and sometimes twelfth drafts of stories can taste a bit like crud too!

"Nope, that cake fell."

"Nope, that cake isn't cooked in the middle."

"Nope, that cake has salt in it instead of sugar."

"This cake came out better, but it's lopsided."

And you just keep working until you get it right!

It also helps having good critique partners and editors who will read your work and go "Hey, this scene doesn't work for X,Y,Z reasons." They're like your story's taste testers! So you need them to give you their honest thoughts about how your work could be better.

### Why is Maeve scared?

Maeve has anxiety, which is a disorder where sometimes your brain gets locked into a loop of obsessively worrying about things. Sometimes they're real things you're worried about (like an upcoming test, a job interview, a performance). And sometimes they're made up or unlikely things (Like, "What if a meteor hits the earth tomorrow?" Or "What if my headache is actually a brain tumor?").

When you have anxiety, it can be hard to break out of that fear loop. And since you're walking around all the time in a low-key panic, seemingly small stuff can cause you to have a "fight or flight" response. Sometimes, you can even have what's called a panic attack, which is like your brain pulling the fire alarm inside your body: Your heart races, you break out into a sweat, you can feel dizzy, or like throwing up, or passing out, or peeing your pants. During a panic attack, your brain tells your body THERE'S AN EMERGENCY- YOU'RE ABOUT TO DIE! Except it's not true: there is no emergency, and you're actually fine.

Some people are able to manage anxiety with therapy, meditation, exercise, or other things. And some people need medication to help their brain stop playing those cruel tricks on their bodies. I am one of the people who benefits a lot from medication.

### **Do you have any pets?**

Yes! I have a dog named Banjo (he's an Australian shepherd mix), a tuxedo cat named Timtam (he's my sweet old man kitty), and a Maine Coon cat named Oliver (who hates all living beings equally).

### **Who are the characters?**

Maeve Mulvaney is the main character of the book. She loves reading, writing, and drawing comics. She's fat, bisexual, and neurodivergent.

Her bestie is Daniel, who's a big reader of everything from comics and SciFi to fantasy and the works of William Shakespeare. Daniel likes to collect interesting words and phrases- especially insults! Daniel is gay.

Frankie dresses lowkey like an anime character, due to her love of anime and manga. She does not take nonsense from anybody, and sometimes her temper gets her in trouble. Frankie is fat, and helps Maeve embrace her fatness without shame. She's a lesbian.

Cori is the mediator in the friend group, the academic overachiever, the social butterfly, and the one who's always trying to encourage people to be kinder to each other. She's straight.

Jamal is the friend who likes to make people laugh. He's into manga and anime too, but is much more of a gamer than anyone else in the group. He's somewhat reserved and doesn't like to rock the boat, but he won't stand by and let people get hurt either. He's straight.

### **What's the setting of your book?**

My book is set in a fictional town outside of Gainesville, Florida. In the story Maeve calls the town "Nowhereville," and you don't actually learn the real name of the town until the last page of the book!

### **Who do you write your stories for?**

I write stories for the weird kids who feel like they don't fit in. Because I was that kid (In a lot of ways, I'm... still kinda that kid??).

## QUESTIONS FROM THE EDITORS

### How does the theme of trust impact Maeve?

Trust is a funny thing to navigate as a neurodivergent person, and that's something I've tried to address with nuance in my book.

At least for myself, I do tend to believe people and take them at their word (unless they've given me a reason not to). So when people behave in a way that's inconsistent with what they've said, or how they've presented themselves, it can absolutely throw me for a loop.

Similarly, Maeve can be naive in some respects, and sometimes doesn't know if people are being genuine or sarcastic. She's been burned enough that she tends to approach new people and situations with a healthy dose of skepticism. Deep down, though? She really WANTS to believe people are inherently good. She wants to believe there's an order and a logic to how people behave. And despite her frustrations, she wants to give people a chance to change.

### Can you tell us a bit about the adults letting Maeve down in your book?

I really wanted to show a range of ways in which adults can let kids down.

There are some adults in the book (Like Coach Crowder and principal Kirkpatrick) who are straight up authoritarians. Maeve obviously runs afoul of these types, because their primary interest isn't in protecting and educating kids, it's in controlling them.

There are other adults (like the school guidance counselor, Mrs. Beaton, and the English teacher, Mrs. Sneep) whose approach is clouded by their personal dogma and biases. They believe they're helping kids by encouraging them to forgive, forget, and keep quiet in the face of injustice. Unlike the principal, Beaton and Sneep aren't creating the patriarchal rules or the unfair systems in play at the school. But they are dedicatedly enforcing them.

These are pretty awful ways to let kids down. But I also wanted to explore ways in which loving, conscientious parents can fail to meet the needs of their kids.

In many respects, Maeve's dad probably gets her the best out of any adult. They have a good relationship and he's more inclined to take her side in family arguments. But he's also prone to making jokes when Maeve is upset, and encouraging her to look on the sunny side. Which sometimes Maeve doesn't mind, but other times, strikes Maeve as a dismissal or minimization of her feelings.

And then there is Maeve's mom, who also suffers from anxiety, but chooses to deal with it very differently from her daughter. She fixates on positivity, and seems to have an angry, knee-jerk reaction whenever Maeve expresses fears, anxieties, or negativity. She is too focused on wanting her daughter to be better than her, and in doing so, overlooks what her daughter actually needs. She's always looking for those "teachable moments." Unfortunately, her heavy-handed approach to her daughter makes Maeve feel constantly unheard, criticized, and condescended to.

### **What inspired you to write this book?**

I wanted to write a book about student activism, but I also wanted to address the issue of toxic positivity in parent-child relationships.

### **Is there any of you in the main character?**

Oh, SO very much. Maeve is, in so many respects, me when I was 14: Angry, anxious, and desperately looking for some way to rectify the injustices of the world. But not knowing where or how to start.

### **What did you do to feel brave in your own life?**

I try to be honest about my missteps and mistakes, which I think takes a kind of bravery. It's so easy for people to pretend that they came out of the womb with the exact, correct way of thinking. That they're always right, and have never once believed anything problematic. To me, thinking that way is a refusal to be honest with yourself and others. It also demonstrates an arrogant lack of appreciation for all the people throughout our lives who've taught us to be better humans. It can be scary and vulnerable, but I think it's vitally important to approach creating stories with humility and self-reflection.

### **Do you think Maeve is trustworthy? Why or why not?**

Yes. She is honest to a fault. The way she thinks, feels, and acts tends to make a straight line. She still makes mistakes! But she owns up to her mistakes and expects the people around her to do the same.

### **How does Maeve hold the adults in her life accountable?**

Maeve holds the adults in her life accountable through her irrepressible honesty! Which, frankly, gets her in trouble quite a lot. Sometimes those

inside thoughts pop out before she has a time to consider or temper them.

**Who if anyone can Maeve rely on?**

I think Maeve comes to realize that she can rely on her friends. Even though they may fight and hold her to a higher standard, when the rubber hits the road, her friends won't let her face the tough stuff alone.

**What do you think would be Maeve's biggest regret?**

I think Maeve's biggest regret is hurting her friends with her classist attitude toward her new home.

You can thank Kelly by checking out her book online, in stores, and by requesting it in your local library!

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