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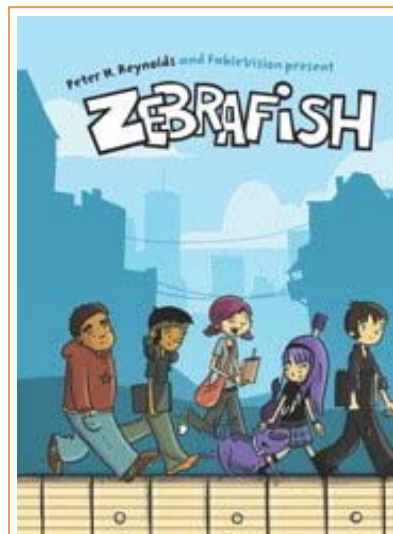
SATURDAY, MAY 22, 2010

A Review of *Zebrafish* by Peter H. Reynolds, Sharon Emerson, and Renée Kurilla

Peter Reynolds may be best known to you as the illustrator of the Judy Moody books and the creator of zen-like picture books such as *Ish* and *The Dot*, but he is also the founder of a children's media company, Fablevision, dedicated to producing "stories that matter, stories that move." While I am usually leery of didacticism, I was pleased to come across Reynolds' latest work, a graphic novel called *Zebrafish*. Reynolds came up with the concept, Sharon Emerson did the writing, and Renée Kurilla created the art for this graphic novel aimed at tweens. [Warning: spoilers below!]

The book is partly sponsored by Children's Hospital Boston, especially their organization, Generation Cures, which is "a philanthropic movement that teaches tweens to use their powers for good." I like the sound of that! (Some of the proceeds from this book go to fund research for the hospital.)

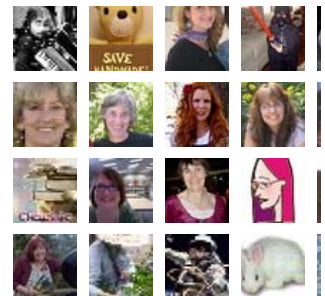
Now, just because a book supports a good cause doesn't mean it's a good book, but this one has definite appeal. The premise is a kick, for example—Vita Escolar tries to start a rock band, but she keeps getting volunteer bandmates who don't actually play instruments. She tries another round of sign-ups, but the same people show up. That's when Vita starts to go with the flow, coming to appreciate



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her odd little team of air guitarist

Plinko, cool techie Jay, quiet artist Walt, and Walt's environmental activist sister Tanya. Rounding out the cast is Vita's older brother, Pablo, who appears to be raising her for some reason. There's a nice ethnic mix here, too.

We gradually learn that Tanya is in treatment for leukemia, a fact that she hides from the kids at school. But Vita is over at the hospital a lot because recent college grad Pablo works in a lab there, and she runs into Tanya and finds out the truth. It turns out that Vita's mother died of cancer. And Pablo's research department needs money to help them with their cancer experiments on zebrafish, the fish which inspires the name of Vita's sort-of band...

A couple of things struck me about this book. First, the cancer element could have been handled badly, and it isn't. One reason I picked up *Zebrafish* is because I am currently teaching sick kids in their homes for the L.A. school district, and a lot of my students are in cancer treatment. So I know whereof I speak. For example, I can tell you that kids with cancer worry about being bald, and a lot of the time they'd rather talk about any- and everything other than their illness. Kids with cancer are just—kids. Which is how they're presented in this graphic novel.

Though the cancer is never addressed in a sloppily sentimental way, do look for a couple of poignant moments involving Walt's drawings of his sister while she is curled up, hurting. It reminded me with a sharp blow of going to see a 6-year-old student of mine who has trouble getting up in the morning to meet with me. She has lost an eye to cancer, and one morning when I got there, she was curled up in a little heap, looking like a bony birdling with that dandelion fluff which is all that remains of her hair. (I madly rearranged my schedule to see her later in the day after that!)

Yet... watch for Vita's unexpected take on Walt's drawings. I also like how the zebrafish is used to good effect as a central symbol.

The style of *Zebrafish* was a tad off-putting at first in the sense that the narrative feels somewhat disjointed, in part because it skips over entire months at a time. These shifts are signalled, but are still jarring in spots. I eventually became accustomed to drawing lines between the dots, however. Then the bits and pieces started to jell for me, and I decided I really liked the book.

Zebrafish is apparently the start of a series. I hope the next book manages to achieve the same impressive balance between message

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ABOUT ME



Kate Coombs
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United State:

and appealing storytelling. Kudos, not only to Reynolds for this project, but to Sharon Emerson for her mastery of off-the-nose dialogue and to Renée Kurilla for his cute-yet-hip artwork.

Speaking of Emerson, the humor here is fantastic. For instance, when Vita begs her brother for a dog, he suggests she borrow the dog next door. Vita does, and we find out that the dog is incontinent and wearing a diaper. But Vita still takes him for a walk, and she discovers a lost dog along the way. Then there are lines like "Want to grab some free-range fries?" or "I hear prison orange is the new salmon." And this exchange:

Where's Tanya?
At the game.
What for?
She skipped a meeting to watch JV soccer?
Nooo. She skipped a meeting to watch Kyle.
Isn't that the kid with the beard?
I thought that was *Gary*.
Gary moved on to mutton chops junior year. Kyle stands alone.

Note that Tanya, despite her medical situation, still has crushes on boys and worries about clothes. When she tells her brother that Kyle "asked her out" to his soccer game, Walt says, "Oh. So...on this date, you'll be one hundred feet apart? And half the time he'll be running away from you?" You see? Genius from our girl Sharon. I even loved her jacket flap bio—look for it! And look for this book, which brings something new to the world of tweens, graphic novels, and children's book publishing.

Note: *Zebrafish* is listed for ages 10-14. Here are links to the [Zebrafish website](#), where you can find a book trailer and webisodes, also the [Fablevision website](#) and the [Generation Cures website](#).

Posted by Kate Coombs at **8:48 AM**

Labels: [cancer](#), [Children's Hospital Boston](#), [Fablevision](#), [Generation Cures](#), [leukemia](#), [Peter Reynolds](#), [Renée Kurilla](#), [Sharon Emerson](#), [Zebrafish](#)

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As an English major in college used to study in the children's book section of the university library because it felt like I was among friends. Since then, I've achieved my dream of having a home office lined with bookshelves full of children's books, and I am also a children's book writer. For a quick look at who I am, read this poem by James Stevenson, "Why": "While other people/Are thinking about all kinds of/Important things.../I am thinking about/What it would like/To jump barefoot/Into an open box/Of jelly donuts?" If you wish to send either a letter or jelly donuts, e-mail me through my author's website linked above. As for comments, keep in mind that I generally reject any attempt to sell a particular book or product. Comments in other languages will be rejected--the ones I've checked out were all spam.

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