Anything But Typical by Nora Raleigh Baskin

Jason Blake is an autistic 12-year-old living in a neurotypical world. Most days its just a matter of time before something goes wrong. But Jason finds a glimmer of understanding when he comes across PhoenixBird, who posts stories to the same online site as he does. Jason can be himself when he writes and he thinks that PhoenixBird—her name is Rebecca—could be his first real friend. But as desperate as Jason is to meet her, he’s terrified that if they do meet, Rebecca will only see his autism and not who Jason really is. By acclaimed writer Nora Raleigh Baskin, this is the breathtaking depiction of an autistic boy’s struggles—and a story for anyone who has ever worried about fitting in.

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My Personal Review:
"When I write, I can be heard. And known.
"But nobody has to look at me. Nobody has to see me at all."

The Schneider Family Book Awards "honor an author or illustrator for a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for children and adolescent audiences...The book must portray some aspect of living with a disability or that of a friend or family member, whether the disability is physical, mental or emotional."

Since its inception, several favorites of mine have gained award recognition from Schneider Family Book Award committees. THINGS NOT SEEN, TENDING TO GRACE, and UNDER THE WOLF, UNDER THE DOG are books I've loved re-reading, reading aloud, and booktalking. All three are entertaining and enlightening in their portrayal of disability in a character, and I've been really excited to see each of them win this award.

"'Jason, this one is free,' the lady says. She puts her hands on my shoulders. This lady is a lady I should know, but her face looks like a lot of other faces I don't know so well, and I group them all together. Her face is pinched, but her eyes are big, round like circles. Her hair doesn't move, like it's stuck in a ball. She belongs in the library or the front office or my dentist's office.
"But she is here now, so I will assume she is the librarian."
"I know from experience that she is trying to help me, but it doesn't. I can feel her weight on my shoulders like metal cutting my body right off my head. This is not a good thing.
"I also know she wants me to look at her.
"Neurotypicals like it when you look them in the eye. It is supposed to mean you are listening, as if the reverse were true, which it is not: Just because you are not looking at someone does not mean you are not listening. I can listen better when I am not distracted by a person's face: "What are their eyes saying?"
"Is that a frown or a smile?"
"Why are they wrinkling their forehead or lifting their cheeks like that? What does that mean?"
"How can you listen to all those words when you have to think about all that stuff?"

I am hoping that when, in future years, I talk of the significance of this award, I will be able to also list ANYTHING BUT TYPICAL as a Schneider Family Award winner. Nora Raleigh Baskin's portrayal of autistic twelve-year-old Jason Blake -- an aspiring author -- is a groundbreaking story for fourth through eighth grade audiences and is one that has greatly enhanced my own understanding of what it would be like to be autistic.

"Other writers say there are only three plots: happy ending, unhappy ending, and literary plot (that's the kind of ending that is uncertain). There is a whole book called Twenty Master Plots, which I happen to own. And another author wrote that he thought there were thirty-nine plots. "But really, if you ask me, there is only one kind of plot. "One. "Stuff happens. "That's it."

The stuff that happens to Jason Blake is this:

Jason regularly posts his fiction to the miscellaneous section of an online fan fiction site called Storyboard. (His stories are actually original rather than fan fiction.) A girl with the pen name PhoenixBird begins commenting enthusiastically on his writing and they begin an email correspondence. Jason feels like he has a friend -- maybe even a girlfriend. His parents then surprise him with an offer that one of them will take him to this year's Storyboard convention in Dallas, Texas. But before he gets the opportunity to email Rebecca (PhoenixBird's real name) that he is attending the convention, she emails him that SHE is going. Now, Jason -- who is quite conscious of his socialization issues -- is faced with his feelings of what Rebecca will think of him in person and his belief that meeting her will result in his no longer be able to imagine that she is his girlfriend.

What helps make Jason's story so exceptional is the manner in which ANYTHING BUT TYPICAL also brings Jason's brother and parents to life.
and provides us such intimate views of the family -- of how living with Jason so significantly affects each family member and constantly impacts all of their interpersonal relationships.

What, repeatedly, is also such a treat are the great lessons about the basics of writing fiction which Jason shares with us:

"You can make up this whole new world and all these amazing characters, but it’s just that in order to make a story, basically, something bad has to happen."

Through Jason's tale, we come to recognize that while his issues may be of a different flavor than ours, this is a young man who has hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses, just as each of us does.

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