

Channel Blue: Riders of the Storm

JZ Bingham

Jason Buhagiar, Illustrator

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For once, judging a book by its cover will serve teachers, students, and parents well. Illustrated by Jason Buhagiar, JZ Bingham's *Channel Blue* is as riveting in its text as it is in its animation-style visuals. The fourth in the award-winning Salty Splashes Collection, Bingham uses clever rhyming couplets to create a picture book about an alluring cast of surf-loving animals and the sea creatures under the waves.

The adventure story is superbly packaged in hardcover with a sleek front-cover design and truly beautiful illustrations, with layouts reminiscent of Disney storyboards.

On the morning of Heat Wave, a surf contest, cartoon animals Stump and Crump attempt to thwart the feline Beardsley so that their boss, Diggy, has a better shot at winning the Golden Fin trophy. The duo enlists the aid of dolphins and sharks as furry beach babes Oola and Kat look on to see which surfer will come out on top. Through Bingham's metered verse, Beardsley overcomes a broken surfboard, rocks outside his cave, and sinister sharks to not only win the contest but also to exercise supreme sportsmanship in befriending his rival in the end.

"In spite of all his scheming and in spite of all his tricks," Bingham writes, "the mighty Diggy hit a wall with quite a lot of bricks. 'We made it, man. Here, take my hand.' The bobcat took a stand. This humbled Diggy mightily. He grinned and took his hand."

Pulled in by Buhagiar's standout illustrations, kids are introduced to life lessons such as perseverance, sportsmanship, and overcoming adversity. Rhymes make the narrative fun to read aloud and will also benefit new readers as they work through Bingham's mix of easy and slightly advanced vocabulary.

Bingham also packs in the action: the furry cartoon cast has a beachside dance party, snorkels through reefs, rides sting rays, conspires with sharks by moonlight, and surfs the white-crested swells. Meanwhile, Buhagiar adds intensity through highly expressive characters drawn to capture the drama and excitement of the Heat Wave competition.

Channel Blue will undoubtedly stand out on any bookshelf, and once cracked open, it will likely become a favorite at group story times or in the hands of a young beginner reader.

AMANDA MCCORQUODALE (August 29, 2014)

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