

Dare to Be Me

Kaci Bolls

Nathan Meckel

Ana Martin Larranaga, Illustrator

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Taking a light, respectful approach to the sensitive topic of children being different from their peers, Dare to Be Me is an exuberant, supportive picture book.

In Kaci Bolls and Nathan Meckel's colorful picture book *Dare to Be Me*, a child makes every day a joyful celebration.

For the enthusiastic child in this rhyming story, each day is a blank page waiting to be filled with fun and adventure. But it wasn't always this way. The child admits to having been concerned about being different: "I used to feel worried about being myself / I couldn't blend in with everyone else." But they learned that—even though being different might feel scary at times—choosing to be true to themselves was worth it: "In a copycat costume, I tried to belong. / But if sameness is right, I dare to be wrong."

The story casts individual difference in a positive light as the exuberant child is shown delighting in multifaceted forms of self-expression: imagining making great, unique contributions to the world; wearing bright, mismatched clothing; engaging in artistic activities with creative flair; and looking at nature with appreciation for its color, endless variety, and the ways its different elements complement each other. But nonconforming behavior is not always appreciated, and this is shown in dark-toned scenes featuring people with disapproving expressions. These moments are brief, though, and the negative vibe is soon countered with abundant displays of color, movement, and joyful defiance of society's constraints.

The rhyming text assumes a steady beat, if with occasional awkward scansion. And the book includes access to a special song that calls for singing along and dancing. The illustrations are enchanting thanks to high-contrast colors and depictions of people's expressive faces and lively body language. Further, they spotlight the many ways in which the child resists conformity. For example, when other children are lined up at the ballet barre doing their imperfect best to look and perform like each other, the child stands out—dressed in vibrant clothing, wild hair flying, and doing an enthusiastic, imperfect arabesque on top of the barre.

While not brought to the fore as an example of differences, the book shows racially diverse children enjoying various activities together. The gender of the main character is left ambiguous, making an opening for a gentle introduction to the different ways that gender may be expressed in the world.

Insightful and fun as it encourages self-expression, creativity, and living an authentic life, *Dare to Be Me* is a delightful picture book that celebrates the uniqueness of every child.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September 8, 2023)

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