

★ **Just Maria**

Jay Hardwig

Fitzroy Books (Jan 7, 2022)

Softcover \$15.95 (140pp)

978-1-64603-082-8

In Jay Hardwig's sweet novel *Just Maria*, a blind twelve-year-old girl wants to be known for what she does, not by the fact of her disability.

Maria was born with tumors in her retinas; she's never experienced sight. She has a cane and glass eyes—the first, and sometimes only, things that people know about her. JJ, the school oddball and Maria's neighbor, isn't one of those people. His attempts at friendship have gone to new levels of strange: he's proposed a series of public challenges that they must give each other to prove their merit, after which he and Maria can join the Twinnoggin Detective Agency and solve local mysteries.

Maria tells JJ to be normal and leave her alone; JJ tells Maria to say "rutabaga" in math class and leave a rubber chicken on the principal's desk. By the end of the book, Maria and JJ have to work together on their first mystery: finding JJ's autistic sister, who went missing in the neighborhood. And maybe they'll admit that they really are friends after all.

The story is told from Maria's perspective, with all of the drama of middle school and friendship and parents at its fore. Some chapters are made up of short lists of things that Maria is annoyed by: pity, attention, and others' thoughts about how she's amazing among them. There's also a list of things that others might be wondering, but are too afraid to ask: how Maria went blind, how Braille works, or how Maria uses her cane. These chapters serve the dual purpose of fleshing out Maria's snarky personality and showing, with empathy, what it's like to be blind. *Just Maria* is a loving novel about living with disabilities.

ASHLEY HOLSTROM (January / February 2022)

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