

Nickerbacher

Terry John Barto

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Nickerbacher is a playful, joyful story with a timeless, powerful message: be yourself and speak from your heart.

Terry John Barto's *Nickerbacher* is an updated fairy tale about a friendly dragon guarding a princess that encourages being true to oneself and standing up for those who are different.

The familiar trope of a relationship between a princess and a dragon is given an original twist. *Nickerbacher* is a self-conscious dragon and the focus of his supportive princess friend's attention. The princess isn't a typical damsel in distress, either. *Nickerbacher* guards her from any princes who might annoy her. They are mutually bemused by the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, wondering, "Why would he kiss someone who's sleeping?"

Nickerbacher's father strongly feels that guarding a princess is a dragon's place in life. But *Nickerbacher* would prefer to be a stand-up comedian on the *Late Knight Show*. With his princess and a new friend, Prince Happenstance, he travels to La La Land—a play on Los Angeles, where all of the fairy tale creatures live. Along the way he is reminded that comedy needs to be truthful and come from the heart. If he simply tells his story, people will like him. He struggles with his father's disapproval and risks going against his "duty" to follow his dream.

This book is a delight, similar in look and feel to Peggy Parish books, with clever pen-and-ink-style illustrations that are perfectly suited to the text. In particular, full-page illustrations of La La Land expertly bend perspective and scale to translate the chaos of so many characters in one vibrant city.

Each chapter is a well-defined step in *Nickerbacher*'s journey, and each character is a nod to the fantasy lexicon. In La La Land the dragon finds a leprechaun acting coach, Santa and his elves attend *Nickerbacher*'s big show, and the rising Miss Phoenix materializes from the ashes to serve as the *Late Knight Show* receptionist.

The story and its classical literary and cultural references are woven together harmoniously. *Nickerbacher* takes a selfie in La La Land and fits his feet into the cement prints of movie stars. He struggles with respectfully defying his parents. His story is so relatable and endearing that it's easy to forget that the dragon is supposed to be so different from everyone else. Therein lies the novel's great success.

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SARA BUDZIK (February 23, 2017)

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