

Piranhas Like S'mores

JZ Bingham

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Piranhas Like S'mores will strike a chord with all readers as it portrays life events that are as funny as they are sad.

Inside *Piranhas Like S'mores* by JZ Bingham, young readers find a fun caper that navigates the tricky landscape of adolescence as characters explore lessons in honesty, compassion, and grief.

Eleven-year-old Klyde is involved in a little shady entrepreneurship, doing classmates' homework in exchange for cash. His partner in crime is his cousin Bonney, who soon schemes with him on the ultimate science fair project. Using the resources of a rich friend, Seldon, the preteens acquire an elaborate fish tank and create a documentary on the feeding habits of piranhas.

Bingham illustrates productive problem-solving as the three characters execute their ambitious science project idea. They even get permission to import the Amazonian fish that are banned in their home state. "I know we were just a bunch of kids and all," Bingham writes as Klyde, "but with the help of all the adults around us, encouraging us and stuff, we were doing something pretty cool. We were on a mission, and we were getting it done."

On a deeper level, the author sprinkles in more serious obstacles to show young readers how to handle tough emotions. Firstly, there is Seldon, who is dealing with the death of his mother; Bingham uses Klyde and Bonney to show how to relate to a truly grieving friend. Secondly, Klyde's beloved dog passes away, and Bingham presents a touching scene in which the parents lovingly comfort Klyde. Thirdly, Bonney suffers a horrible accident that lands her in intensive care, and Klyde and Seldon must confront their own fear of losing a close friend.

Bingham should be commended for managing to address life's harsh realities within a comic tale sometimes so ridiculous that piranhas dine on s'mores. But what really stands out is the author's knack for conveying an authentic preteen voice. Klyde's mix of awareness and innocence is a dead-on portrait of the confusing jumble of emotions in those formative years. His voice and the cultural references he uses make him a believable protagonist.

Whether Bingham's characters are trying to get piranhas into a fish tank or visiting their comatose friend in the hospital, they call on personal strength, kindness, and the support of others to find their way. As Bingham writes, "Some things go bad without you ever seeing them coming. And some things go bad because you made them happen. Either way, you can try to make things right again."

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AMANDA MCCORQUODALE (September 30, 2014)

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