



The Best Day Ever

K. D. McPhillips

Amazon KDP

(48pp)

979-898930940-5

*In the sweet novel *The Best Day Ever*, a boy learns about self-worth and acceptance from a menagerie of new friends.*

Set in a garden teeming with adventures, K. D. McPhillips's novel *The Best Day Ever* is about new beginnings and unexpected friends.

Chris is not happy to be starting over yet again. A new school means rediscovering how to fit in and who to befriend. When a strange visit from a talking skunk transports Chris to an otherworldly garden, he is forced to reevaluate what true friendship means.

The story begins with Chris bemoaning his new surroundings and missing old friends. His distress is clear, but a lack of background details and a dearth of his interactions with other people makes his growth throughout hard to measure. That he displays little curiosity about the garden's mysteries and works through his inner turmoil in just a day also detracts from the story's delivery.

Still, Chris's adventures in the garden are amusing. He dances with bears and races a wolf, delighted at how the animals all get along. The different critters and their myriad skills symbolize the beautiful diversity of human talents and traits, teaching Chris that always trying to "fit in" means compromising the good he has to offer (like his ear for music). And heavy themes of rejection and fear are alleviated—without being mitigated—by lighter moments of games and dancing. Music's unifying power is emphasized through the joy and laughter that Chris's guitar brings to the garden.

The book's six chapters are short, and the language is accessible if sometimes choppy. Each chapter is accompanied by a full-page grayscale illustration. These are soft and expressive, complementing the descriptions of the beautiful garden and its fun-loving inhabitants. In one illustration, Sally the alligator offers a toothy grin as she sneaks up on Chris; in another, Chris embraces Jay the skunk surrounded by tiny wildflowers.

The story climaxes with a visit from Jesus, who comes to see the animals every evening. Jay tells Chris that he should not worry about impressing others because God created him to be the way he is. Subtler Christian references—a protective lion named Joshua, the Eden-evoking harmony of the garden—result in richness and complexity, without extensive knowledge of Christianity being needed to understand the story's lessons. Still, the hopeful conclusion is quite abrupt. After spending his day in the garden, Chris decides he does not mind his new home. Questions as of how he deals with the unkind "cool" kids are left unresolved.

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VIVIAN TURNBULL (April 18, 2024)

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