

The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez

Peter Johnson

Reviewed by: Annie, 24

Star Teen Book Reviewer of Be the Star You Are! Charity

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The Life and Times of Benny Alvarez is a fun, suspenseful story of Benny, a middle school age boy, who is clever with a thesaurus. Benny and his two buddies are known as the wordsmiths because of their enthrallment with “The Book” where they find more interesting and complicated words for every situation. Because of his command of words, Benny is chosen to represent the boys in a poetry contest against his arch-enemy, Claudine, the girls’ representative. Benny and Claudine are tasked with writing and reciting a prose- or rhymed- poem, respectively, in order to convince the class which format is better.

Though the neither Benny nor Claudine are able to show that their format makes the best poem (in fact, both poems turn out equally good,) the two enemies do learn something. As both characters are forced by the competition to consider love and/or loss, they learn that it is much easier to empathize with each other than they had believed. Both characters undergo emotional turmoil as Benny’s grandfather suffers a stroke, becoming more frail and forgetful, and Claudine endures the loss of her beloved dog, Hobo. As Benny and Claudine resolve their feud and are able to respect each other and become friends, young readers will learn that when you take the time to get to know someone’s story, you may have more in common with them than you believed.

Peter Johnson’s story is a great one for readers to learn the power of an attitude, as well as the power of the thesaurus. Benny’s mother constantly reminds her critical son to look at the glass half full, and when he actually loses some negativity, he is a happier person. Through Benny’s character, children will be introduced to the concept of synonyms in a way that makes finding the right word fun and interesting as Benny and his friends use their prized thesaurus to name people, actions, and things in the perfect way. I would love to read more books by Peter Johnson and recommend this book to everyone.