

Pickle, by Kim Baker
Review by Kimberly Mach

Pickle: The (Formerly) Anonymous Prank Club of Fountain Point Middle School, by Kim Baker.

Description from the back of the book:

Dear Parents and Teachers:

This is a work of fiction. There is no Prank and Trick Association at Fountain Point Middle School. And you absolutely will not find instructions on how to log in to a top-secret prank instruction website anywhere on these pages. All we do I make pickles. OK?

Sincerely,
Ben Diaz

President, The League of Pickle Makers

My two cents:

Now, if the description above won't get a child to pick up a book, I'm not sure what will.

Kim Baker had me laughing right from the first page. The book opens with this line: Can I trust you? She had me hooked right there, with all that the question implies.

There are so many ways to talk about *Pickle* because it really is a perfect middle grade novel. Kids will laugh out loud, and they may even go scrambling to create their own prank clubs. Beyond the laughter, they will identify with the ever-changing landscape of middle school friendships. Ben Diaz, the main character, creates a Prank Club, under the guise of a Pickle Makers club. Due to an earlier incident Ben does not invite his best friend Oliver into the club. (Oliver's grandmother is the school principal and Oliver, well, Ben thinks Oliver just can't be trusted to keep the secret.) Reading it I found myself wondering what the halls of my school would look like if they were bubbles in the fountains or impromptu parties in the classrooms. Throughout the mayhem lessons are woven in. Ben learns about himself, his new friends and just how 'off' we can be when we try to label someone, but most of all he learns what kind of friendship he and Oliver really have. There are lessons here in action and reaction, cause and effect, consequences and the impact of our decisions all told masterfully through the eyes and comedy of young Ben Diaz.

As an adult reader, what resonated with me was the very real problem of what *isn't* in the history books. In preparation for Pioneer Day the Prank Club realizes they have to have something pickled for the Pioneer Fair. If they don't they will lose their funding from the PTA and that will be the end of the Prank Club.

What to do? Ben turns to his family and their family restaurant. They frequently serve *Escabeche*, or pickled vegetables, at their Mexican restaurant. Ben realizes *escabeche* can be their entry for the fair. Then Ben hesitates. He asks the question that needs to be asked, the one that many children who do not see themselves reflected back on the pages of history books wonder about. Were there Mexican pioneers?

Ben goes on to say: "I've never seen any in the pictures. It's always just a bunch of white guys." And then later, the realization that, "It doesn't mean they weren't there."

The time period for our children is different from that of my youth. In my youth we may have asked the question, but because of available resources we probably could not have answered it, at least not in a timely fashion. The internet has allowed people and organizations to post information and share resources in a much more efficient manner. When Ben wonders about pioneers from Mexico he does not have to go far to find that reliable source. Instead of spending an afternoon at the town hall he can answer it with the click of the button. As an adult I could not escape the implications of this when Ben remembers being criticized in kindergarten for using the brown paper to make his Pilgrims for Thanksgiving. I felt his pain. There are so many who were at first skimmed over in the history books, but the information is there, if we ask the questions. Step one is teaching our children to ask questions like Ben did. Where are the women in this picture? Who worked in the factories? Why does this city have a Spanish name? What happened when native peoples went to reservations? Ben chooses to share an authentic pickling recipe from Mexico. It may not be the traditional pickle recipe people were expecting at the fair, but it is delicious and the scene, of course, is memorable. Trust me, you'll be cheering for him when he has the conversation with Principal Lebonsky about this.

Curriculum connections:

This book would be an excellent read-aloud in the classroom, appropriate for grades 3-6. It can be enjoyed for the story, or a teacher can choose to take the lessons further.

Life-size character sketches are one extension idea. The descriptions of each character are in the front jacket of the book. Many children will see themselves reflected in the personalities and the ethnicities of Ben and his friends. Traits can be filled in as readers follow the story, with life-size versions being presented at the end.

Many upper elementary and early middle school grades study pioneer days as part of their curriculum. The pioneer fair story in the novel fits perfectly with that. It may also encourage students to ask the important questions and to look more deeply at the pictures of people in their own state and communities.

The *escabeche* could be the beginning to a small unit on preserving food both in the past and now. Compare and contrast, how did Native Americans preserve food? When were other methods introduced? What are traditional foods of the region? How are they preserved today? The possibilities are endless here.

Enjoy the book. Readers of all ages will love it. When you are done, visit Kim Baker's website at <http://kimbakerbooks.com/> and enjoy more of her voice and humor there.

Pickle is her debut novel and has already received five awards including the Louisiana Young Reader's Choice 2015 nominee, 2014-2015 Texas Blue Bonnet Award Nominee, and the 2013 SCBWI West Crystal Kite award.

I, for one, hope to hear more from this author soon.