



Fish in a Tree

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A *New York Times* Bestseller!

The author of the beloved *One for the Murphys* gives readers an emotionally-charged, uplifting novel that will speak to anyone who's ever thought there was something wrong with them because they didn't fit in.

“Everybody is smart in different ways. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its life believing it is stupid.”

Ally has been smart enough to fool a lot of smart people. Every time she lands in a new school, she is able to hide her inability to read by creating clever yet disruptive distractions. She is afraid to ask for help; after all, how can you cure dumb? However, her newest teacher Mr. Daniels sees the bright, creative kid underneath the trouble maker. With his help, Ally learns not to be so hard on herself and that dyslexia is nothing to be ashamed of. As her confidence grows, Ally feels free to be herself and the world starts opening up with possibilities. She discovers that there's a lot more to her—and to everyone—than a label, and that great minds don't always think alike.

From the Hardcover edition.

Fish in a Tree Details

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From Reader Review Fish in a Tree for online ebook

Donalyn says

Ally and her experiences will resonate with many children and teachers. A beautiful, hopeful story.

Amanda says

This was a fairly sweet story, but I felt like it was too much what is "trendy" right now - writing books about children with difficulties fitting in who make great discoveries about their identities and gain sudden confidence. This is an easy story to tell, but it's not realistic.

Furthermore, I felt that the characters were very stereotypical and not well-developed. This bothers me in children's books because the popular girls are always mean, the nerdy kids get beat up all the time, and the teachers don't care when a kid is bullied right in front of them. Yes, all of these things CAN happen, but they are far from the norm. However, we see them constantly in children's literature.

I also didn't find the premise believable. I have worked as a reading interventionist in schools, and it would be very, very difficult to make it to sixth grade with no one noticing that a child couldn't read. Every child is tested regularly one-on-one in the schools several times throughout the year, and this was the case when I was in school too. Those children I dealt with who made it to third grade without a learning disability being detected were rare, and they could all read better than Ally is described as reading.

Barb Middleton says

I read oodles of books. Always have. Always will. Sure wish these blogs were around when I was growing up in the age of typewriters. My reading experiences are quite different than the students I chat with on a daily basis. They come at books with their own unique perspectives. Just like me. Just like you. This book has an appealing emotional punch that is similar to "Wonder," by R.J. Palacio and terrific character development. As an adult reader who has many favorites when it comes to books on children with disabilities, I'm getting pickier over what is original and stands out in the herd. While some parts of this story were touching, others fell short.

Sixth grader Ally is in school and her teacher is going on maternity leave. She asks her students to write a short paragraph on themselves for the long-term substitute teacher. The teacher and Ally get in a power struggle because Ally doesn't want anyone to know she can't read or write. Ally gets angry at being forced to write and scribbles hard on the desktop because she knows she'll get out of the activity. The teacher sends her to the principal and cleans the desk. Hmmm... usually the kid would clean the desk but this is one frustrated teacher. And she plays right into Ally's hands.

Ally's brain will think one thing and she'll blurt out another. Making friends is like washing peanut butter out of hair. She is bullied by Shay but also laughed at constantly by other kids in class. Most think she is trying to be funny and her quick-witted responses are often accidental - she doesn't mean to be a jokester or sassy-mouthed. The result is she fools the adults around her and successfully hides her disability. Other outliers in her class are picked on such as Albert, the scientific genius; Oliver, the ADHD tornado; and Keisha, the cooking prodigy. When the new teacher shows up he figures out that Ally has dyslexia and the two bond as

she deals with her learning difficulty. More importantly, he draws out the potential in her and she learns to read and believe in herself.

The beginning sets up the stereotyped teacher that can't manage students and is exasperated by an uncooperative student. Her character is flat and perhaps it makes her a more obvious foil to the substitute teacher, Mr. Daniels; however, her lack of complexity made me not as engaged in the plot until Mr. Daniels chalks his way into the classroom scenes. Ally's inner monologue shows the emotional turmoil of a kid that is full of self-doubts. Students will empathize with Ally as she agonizes over making friends, feeling like a loser, and dealing with her problem. She lashes out at others and desperately wants to fit in with her peers. When she makes friends with the other misfits, Albert and Keisha, she finds power in friendship. Although when Ally first meets Keisha she asks her if she likes eggs and rambles on about all the different ways she likes eggs. This painful exchange magnifies her social ineptness. By the end this drastically awkward girl has all but disappeared.

The middle of the story takes off with characters defined by distinct traits and voices. Ally's brother shows that he has an engineer-type brain but suffers from the same learning fate as Ally. The dad is deployed overseas in the Middle East and the mom is doing the best she can with her children. The brother's ingenious design of windshield wipers without a motor reveal his innovative and inventive spirit. Mr. Daniel's character shows he's not always perfect either. Sometimes he singles Ally out to praise her and give her confidence that makes her feel like a charity case, other times he shares her secret. The complexity of trying to teach Ally is captured not only with her fragile ego, but with Mr. Daniel's not always making the right choices when dealing with her. This strengthens the authenticity of their relationship and shows that Ally can forgive even when she's been hurt by adults. I thought Mr. Daniel got preachy at times changing the focus from Ally's internal changes to a slight didactic tone on how to behave, especially at the end.

The humor balances the darker themes of bullies, anger, and misunderstandings. Ally tells Albert and Keisha why Shay is hell-bent on making her life miserable and it is easy to see why they don't get along. And it is Ally's fault. I won't spoil it, because it is so Ally. Needless to say Ally's mistake and Shay's relentless put-down's are understandable. Shay's mother is a bully, as well as her daughter, making Shay's character more understandable and engaging. The author creates strong characters that pull the reader into the plot along with themes such as self-acceptance, confidence, and communication, to name a few.

The ending doesn't seem authentic because Ally goes from this impulsive kid that is a bit odd to a leader in the classroom that the kids look up to, ask advice, and want to be friends with in a very short time. It did not add up with the evolution of her character. Perhaps when Keisha, Albert, and Ally fantasize about the future about how successful they will be and are dreaming big, it sent me spinning off the cliff. I just needed them to be settled in their skin and instead the focus shifts toward them being successful in the eyes of the world and that jarred with me because up to that point they were being successful in their own eyes. In the book, "Absolutely Almost," by Lisa Graff, the boy learns to accept himself without outward success and it seemed more authentic; whereas, this is more wish fulfillment. There is nothing wrong with it, but it made the resolution feel off.

Novice readers have limited emotional experiences and reading is one way they can live vicariously through characters and be exposed to emotions before they happen in real life. This exposure helps prepare them to have empathy for others. By representing the inner qualities of a character such as feelings, beliefs, assumptions, intentions, and thoughts, an author can produce a way for readers to empathize with fictional characters giving them a strong emotional engagement that supports their cognitive and social development. This book does just that. And while I'm coming at it from as an adult reader and see some holes, I know that most will want to be on team Ally. A great addition to any library.

Bennett says

3.5 stars

"Everybody is smart in different ways. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its life believing it is stupid"

Ally Nickerson has successfully hidden her inability to read from all the many schools she's been in throughout her life. But a new teacher forces her to address the problem, and pushes her to places she'd never thought she could go.

This book was fine. 3.5 stars in basically the very middle of the rating spectrum, so I'm just kind of neutral.

Ally was a likeable protagonist, and she had some good moments. I couldn't really picture her as the troublemaker she supposedly was before the story began, however.

Enter Mr. Daniels, a typical hip, young, change-your-life teacher. Those pop up a lot in books like these. What can I say? He just wasn't unique. I felt like he didn't have much of a character except for his perfect-teacher-ness. He reminded me of Mr. Terupt (Because of Mr. Terupt), and the counselor from There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom.

Ally's friends also seemed contrived and overused. Keisha, the confident friend. Albert, the so-smart-he's-quirky friend. I've seen both too many times.

The story itself is good. I was entertained through the whole novel.

Although, I did find Shay (typical mean girl) to be a bit unrealistic. If someone was actually THAT mean to everyone, she wouldn't have any friends. Even her school yard minions would soon leave. She was relentlessly vindictive, and it never stopped. What type of monster does that?

Mr. Daniels seemed to favor Ally A LOT. I had a teacher who had about four favorite students, and it stunk. (view spoiler)

It was an okay book, but I think Lynda Mullaly Hunt could've used about two more revision drafts before sending this to print.

Kellee says

Full review at: <http://www.unleashingreaders.com/?p=5674>

5 stars times 100. I adore so much about this book.

Ally is so many students that I have had over the years that just needed a teacher to take the time.

Mr. Daniels is the teacher that I hope I am, that I wish I could be, that I want all teachers to be, and that I want to be friends with.

Ally's journey is one that I hope I inspire my students to have.

Keisha is the friend I wish I'd had.

Albert is so many student in our schools that are just a bit different thus leading to a life of sorrows.

Shay shows that meanness often is because of meanness.

Travis shows that it is never too late to change a kid's life.
So many special characters and such a special story.
Once again, Lynda Mullaly Hunt made me cry. Well done!

Emily says

Ugh. Two stars is definitely generous for this one, but I guess I would recommend it (not very enthusiastically) to middle-graders who like problem novels and aren't old enough to notice that this is hackneyed as hell. There is a mean girl who is cartoonishly mean, a sassy black best friend (SERIOUSLY?), a smart kid who talks like Data (ARGH), a super shy Japanese girl who talks in broken English (*headdesk*), and a warm-hearted cool male teacher who wears funny ties and saves the day while saying things like "It's so brave of you to come to school every day knowing that the other kids will razz you." RAZZ YOU? And the too-special-to-be-true heroine says things like "Yeah, he's a peach," (because it is 1950 apparently? maybe that's why no one in the world has ever heard of dyslexia before? but no, because there is Skyping). I might be most upset by the fact that we're supposed to believe these kids are sixth graders and not third graders. Maaaaybe fourth. But only if they live in some bizarre 1950s throwback two-dimensional stereotype-land.

This book is showing up on Mock Newbery lists? Really?

Lola says

I don't see why this book shouldn't be read by every single middle schooler out there. Young adults also. And why not adults as well, it is pretty captivating. No one should keep themselves from reading it because of their age.

Because it explores such timeless and important themes. I wish there was a book like this one when I was in middle school. I remember well having a really hard time the last year, and this would have helped a lot.

Ally isn't alone, but she does feel lonely. Even in a room full of people—full of her classmates, the people she's known for years—she doesn't feel like there's anyone on her side. Until Mr. Daniels arrives, replacing Mrs. Hall who is having a baby. Mr. Daniels cares deeply about his students, and when he sees Ally struggling, he tries to help her as best he can.

Unfortunately, I have to admit I've never in my life had a teacher like Mr. Daniels, but it doesn't mean the teachers I did have were any less inspiring. To me he is the epitome of dedication and patience. He truly is the perfect teacher. Actually, he's also impossible to dislike. He refrains from judging anyone and teaches his students important life lessons. And his cheerfulness is invigorating!

This is a very educative book. You'll learn new words, new facts, how to make new friends, how to deal with bullying and enemies, why giving up should never be an option, how different doesn't mean crippled... and many other things. I appreciated the educational parts, even if they were rather head-on, since I personally learned things I never knew about and I'm 19.

If it were up to me, I'd make this book a mandatory reading in middle school. Vote Lola?

Blog | Youtube | Twitter | Instagram | Google+ | Bloglovin'

DaNae says

Really? A student makes it to sixth grade without any educators realizing she can't read?

Kavya_E1 says

Fish In a Tree, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt, is a stand-alone novel about a young girl named Ally Nickerson who enjoys school but struggles in reading. It's not for a lack of trying but she tends to avoid books because she fears her limitations will be exposed. To cover for herself, she makes minor mischief at school that leaves her misunderstood by her teacher and peers. But when a new teacher arrives, he helps Ally see her true potential. Combined with a fledgling self-confidence and new friends, Ally takes small steps towards conquering her fears and insecurities.

This was one of those cases where the cover attracted me to the book before I even knew what it was about. (You have to admit – that is a pretty cool image and it looks more impressive in person as the fish is actually glossy so it stands out.) Thankfully, the book's premise and story both held weight, enough to make it on the top 10 realistic fiction book list.

Fish in a Tree is true to its title! It's charming, quirky, and shows that everyone is gifted differently so no two people are alike. Without being too preachy, this novel shows readers that disabilities don't have to define or confine you. Ally is a true sweetheart who perseveres and keeps her chin up. The ending is satisfying and also proves that life isn't all doom and gloom. I'd highly recommend this book to anyone looking for a pick-me-up read as well as to teachers who might consider adding this novel to their classroom's shelves.

Jeannette Nikolova says

Read on the WondrousBooks blog.

"I want to give him an answer, but I have both too many words and not enough."

To be honest, this book was an unexpected gem for me. I liked the cover and I was in for some new books from NetGalley, but I didn't think it would be awesome, I expected a pleasant enough read at most. Turned out it was quite the amazing book after all.

Fish In A Tree tells the story of a young girl who can't make the words and letters stay in place and always feels out of her depth in school because of that. Some of her classmates make fun of her and she is convinced that is really, truly stupid. Until a new teacher comes to school and makes her realize that her brain simply works differently and that many of the most brilliant minds ever had dyslexia, just like her.

As a whole, the book was very sweet and touching. It's probably not going to win an award for most brilliant writing or plot, but that doesn't mean it's not great. The story is simple but heartfelt.

At first I was annoyed with **Ally** because she seemed to be purposely failing, but I soon realized that that was

not the case at all. I realized that she was actually struggling very hard to be better, though at the beginning that wasn't apparent.

With time, **Ally** turned out to be quite the wonderful character, brave, even though she was failing, stubborn, even though it seemed hopeless. I really liked how she grew up in the course of the book and the big little person she became at the end. Most of all. I liked the final scene with her brother and the teacher, it really moved me.

The recurring characters were not a stroke of originality, of course - a band of outcasts, a posse of mean girls, a couple of kids not brave enough to stand up for the weaker ones until the weaker kids became willful enough to fend for themselves. But they were fun to read about. They also grew. along with Ally. I liked **Albert** the most. I was sad for him, but I was also proud of the way he carried himself and learned to live with his difficulties. Actually, come to think of it, I think he was my favourite character in the entire book.

Though **Mr Daniels** was also admirable. He presented a whole new field of ideas in this book. Setting the coming-of-age theme of the book aside, there was also the subject of teaching and education, which I think was equally as important. It really saddens me to see written what I know is true - that education is becoming a formalized activity which focuses not on the knowledge children should receive, but on results, no matter the cost. Most teachers don't see teaching as a calling, as I think it should be, but as a way to pay the bills if you don't have any other job opportunities. They don't care about the learning differences kids have and they in no way find ways to nurture all of their students, on the contrary, the favourites are the ones that can keep up with the insane criteria for a successful student, and the rest are being oppressed, sent to the principle, declared stupid and even mocked by the teachers. I think that's completely unacceptable. Once upon a time the teacher was a guide, a friend of his or her students, until our world developed to this point where you are good at something if you are making millions, and if you can't do that, you become a teacher instead, you are bitter and mean and want to take it out on the children that you have promised to protect and teach. It's a horrible and sad reality the results of which can obviously be seen in the thousands of school dropouts and especially in the millions and billions of children who struggle to memorize information in order to look like they know what they are doing but actually end up knowing nothing at all. It would be so much easier and helpful if teachers cared about what they were doing, that way children would also have a different attitude to learning and would actually do it with desire and would be successful. In that fashion, Mr Daniels reminded me of **John Keating from Dead Poets Society**, one of my favourite movies. I honestly hope that more teachers would be like that and that one day that profession will turn again into a calling and education will turn into something that people desire, instead of something they are forced into.

If you have ever felt like you didn't belong, like you couldn't keep up and the world was moving around you, like you weren't smart enough or good enough, I think Fish In A Tree is the book for you and it can inspire you to work a little harder and to realize that through hard work you can achieve bigger things.

"It's like birds can swim and fish can fly."

Claudia says

4.5 stars...strong, relatable book about a girl with a secret. Ally gets into trouble all the time at school because she won't do her reading and writing. She won't follow directions, and she makes really bad decisions about what she does and says.

She is a talented artist, as her brother is a talented mechanic...as long as they don't have to read the

directions.

For years they have both hidden the fact they can't read or write. They distract, they overcompensate, and they just take the hits as being a troublemaker instead of a struggling reader.

I know Ally...I've had Ally. To hear her side of the story brings OUR struggle to light.

Ally is dealing with so much...her dad is deployed, her classmates bully and tease her, she has no friends. And she carries her distress about not being able to read with her as a constant weight.

Then, the new dynamic teacher arrives and sees what no one else ever saw...not her former teachers at the six other schools, not her principals. No one.

He is the savior who jumps in with his knowledge of reading and dyslexia from his special education classes and he's the one who works with her patiently..

But Ally and her friends are the ones who change the climate of the classroom and form new friendships.

Albert is brilliant and messy and another oddball. Keisha is a talented, inventive baker with a mouth and courage to speak up. The three form a friendship that warms your heart.

That half-star is for my disappointment that the career educators are shown to be blind to Ally's struggles. Disinterested, frustrated. The only thing her first teacher seems to know how to do is to send Ally to the office.

It's the new, inexperienced teacher who turns it all around. Who know and sees...BUT he does not stop the bullying in his classroom. That bothered me.

It would be refreshing to read a book about a career teacher who has been reaching out and helping kids for a career, and not just for a semester.

Niggling regret, I know. But 39 years with kids makes me protective of those hard-working teachers who have stuck it out for the long run and touched kids lives for years.

Brandy Painter says

Soooo....black sheep here in a big way, but I'm completely at a loss to explain why this has an average of nearly 4.5 stars. I actually ALMOST gave it 2 stars, but thought maybe I was being too nitpicky about the biggest problems I had with the book (see below). I still might come back and do that, but thought I would give myself some time to consider.

ETA: DAYS of considering this book in more detail has convinced me that I can't leave this at three starts so I've dropped it to my original thought of two.

Overall this book is fine. It's a little long for the story it's telling. (I'm always amused by the irony of a book written about a dyslexic student that a dyslexic student would break out in hives at the thought of being made to read it.) There are places where it reads like an American Girl movie (if the girl of the year ever came from a working class family) minus the musical numbers. Mostly I felt like it was more of a book for teachers. Or students majoring in education. With an incredibly unrealistic look at how bullying works and is

resolved.

My (possibly) nitpicky major issue:

I'm a military brat myself and I was majorly distracted though the majority of this book by how WRONG Hunt got that. I must add the disclaimer that I'm an Air Force brat, but my father was once stationed at a base on an Army post so I'm fairly familiar with Army culture too.

Problems:

*Army families do not PCS every year. It would be every two years AT MOST. (one year deployment, one year on post for the active duty member). And the Army actually changed that policy in 2013 to every 3-4 years so families would have more stability.

*WHY was Ally the only military kid in her class????? Laughs forever at this. Even off post schools in a system with a military presence have a TON of military kids in them (and they tend to stick together). (And not all posts have DoD schools.) Seriously. If you've ever been to a military town, you know how much it affects the entire town's culture. Which leads me to...

*Where were they living? There is absolutely no mention in Ally's family of things that are par for the course to military dependents. If they weren't even living at/near the post where her father was officially stationed, why were they moving so much? Why did they have to go to a friend's house for internet?

*Unless I'm much mistaken (and I did double check to be sure about this), Army tanks don't have captains. They have commanders. (They wouldn't call it a captain because that is an officer rank and there are no officers in a tank crew. The commander of the tank is the highest ranking enlisted person on the crew.) And you can't fob me off by telling me Ally might be confused. When you are the kid of a career military person, you know their rank and their job.

*Maybe Ally's dad was National Guard called to Active but that REALLY doesn't explain why the family was moving every year. And even then a tank commander is usually a sergeant (I believe) and that's not a very high enlisted rank. And if you don't make your next rank in a certain number of years, you have to get out. Judging on Ally's brother's age, her dad can't be super young. But maybe he jus signed up later?

I know people will say it doesn't matter but it was a MAJOR distraction for me. (As you can probably tell.)

Minor (possibly) nitpicky bother:

OF COURSE it was a male teacher who rode in on his white horse to save the day. Because the women teachers are too distracted by their babies and what not. Blech all over that.

Adam James says

I'm pretty confused at the amount of 4 and 5 star reviews for this one. It's almost like people haven't read this exact book 57 times already.

Apparently I'm in the minority in proclaiming there to be way more wrong with *Fish in a Tree* than there is right.

So...we have a book about a dyslexic child that's close to 300 pages. Is Hunt trying to give dyslexic kids a panic attack?

Also, as a sixth grade reading and writing teacher, it's UNFATHOMABLE to believe that a child could make it all the way to sixth grade without anyone noticing she's dyslexic. In what appears to be a pretty competent school district with competent teachers, how could this character slip through the cracks THAT long without any teacher seriously noticing her dyslexia? Even the heroic and super empathetic young cool guy teacher didn't notice the character's learning disability for what feels like months? AND he only has like 13 kids in his class?!

As unrealistic as that sounds, it could be easily forgiven if the rest of Hunt's book was interesting, or clever, or different, or *interesting*.

Guess what! There's a bully! And she's prissy! And there's a robotically intelligent science geek! And he gets beaten up! By *different* bullies! And there's a Japanese girl named Suki who speaks in broken caveman-English (ugh).

The reason why *Wonder* was such a revelation is because R.J. Palacio side-stepped the cliches with creative narrative structure featuring painfully realistic character development.

But Lynda Mullaly Hunt's *Fish in a Tree* is supposed to garner the same kind of attention as R.J. Palacio despite lacking everything that made *Wonder* so important?

In a novel where the overall themes teach kids to be proud of what makes them different, why does Hunt feel the need to be so *ordinary*?

And why are we applauding her for it?

Michelle Haseltine says

This is a book written with so much heart! It's a book for teachers everywhere. Mr. Daniels is the teacher we all want to be. It's a book for any student (or any person) who feels less than or invisible and wants to fit in. I laughed and cried and I really felt everything that Ally was going through. The characters are so real to me...I miss them. This is one of those books that you don't want to miss!!! Get ready for an amazing reading experience! I know it's a book I'll be returning to again and again!

Ms. Yingling says

Ally struggles in school, often getting in trouble for flippant behavior that she uses to deflect the teacher's attention to the fact that she has trouble reading and writing. When she gives her teacher a sympathy card at a baby shower, she gets in even more trouble, but no one at school still pays attention. Her family has moved around quite a bit because her father is in the military, but her brother has had problems with reading as well. Luckily, the substitute for the pregnant teacher, Mr. Daniels, is a little more flexible in his assignments and eventually realizes that Ally is struggling with dyslexia. He also works to put an end to the mean girl tactics exhibited by Shay and her friends, who also target that oddly verbose but poorly dressed Albert, as well as Keisha, who is interested in baking.

Strengths: Even though I enjoyed this author's *One for the Murphys*, I had concerns about this one. There are particular flavors of problem novels that students like, and they tend to be domestic abuse, drugs, cutting or anorexia, and homelessness. (Hey, just reporting on a dozen years of conversations with students!) School problems generally appeal to younger students, but I found this book to be hopeful and engaging. There's some interesting diversity (economic instability, race, learning difficulties) and positive adult influence, which is rather rare in books these days. I think that students who enjoy *Wonder* will like this one. The cover is appealing, the message is good: I think I'll buy a copy.

Weaknesses: Albert seems a little over the top, but he never quite annoyed me. I also found it hard to believe that no one had realized Ally's reading difficulties-- sometimes it seems like every student in my school is on an IEP! When we have new students who are struggling, it's usually not more than two weeks before we all start to discuss what can be done to help bolster the child's academic success.
