

Open Heart: A True Story

John J. Dias

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(44pp)

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Endearing sibling hijinks and examples of childhood determination make Open Heart an inspiring picture book.

In John J. Dias's inspirational autobiographical picture book *Open Heart*, a girl with multiple disabilities believes in herself, helping her brother find his own motivation.

John struggles to understand why his older sister, Lily, needs a wheelchair and why she can't play with him the way he wants to. Their parents explain that Lily needs extra support. John is asked to be patient with her, as doctors say she may never walk.

Lily's determination to walk on her own shows John that patience and determination drive people to achieve their goals. When he is injured in a car accident, it takes him years to recover. John is inspired by Lily's strength; in time, he decides to train for a marathon, set to take place on Lily's next birthday.

Anecdotes about John stealing a few minutes in Lily's wheelchair and performing ninja sneak attacks on her enliven the book's first half, which details the trials and joys of their childhood relationship. Indeed, John is a humble and self-deprecating lead whose hijinks are endearing. Throughlines are introduced: In childhood, John pretends that Lily's wheelchair is a throne and that he is a king; in his adulthood, he loses his "crown" due to balding. Lily, meanwhile, is characterized in terms of her strength and persistence: She exercises every day and takes her first steps at the age of seven, setting a precedent for the book's second half, about John's transformation from a couch potato to a marathoner after his accident.

In covering the marathon, the book switches to a montage approach, showing flashes of John running paired with the wisdom he learned from Lily about walking "on legs never meant to work." Such moments lead to a heartfelt ending. And standout phrases buttress the book's theme of tackling challenges with joy: "Our family is a team ... each member has something to contribute," "You proved the doubters wrong," and "I followed in your footsteps."

The illustrations are cartoon renditions of childhood photographs. They depict John, Lily, and their parents with bold colors and expressive faces, in a comic-book style. The playful font features enlarged key words, including "impossible," "possible," and "believe." Fantasy flourishes bolster the humor of some scenes, while images of Lily progressing from wheelchair to leg braces to tricycle are more serious in nature.

Alternating between humor and wisdom, *Open Heart* is an uplifting picture book about a girl's inspiring determination to overcome all obstacles.

AIMÉE JODOIN (January 15, 2025)

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