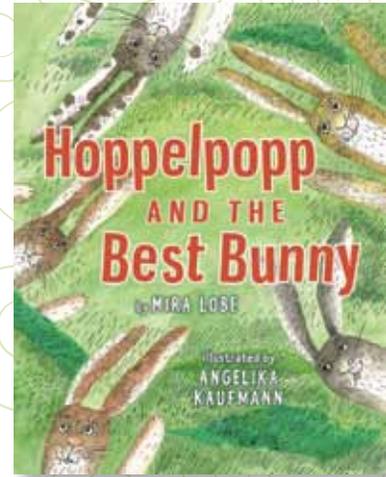




# SO MANY BOOKS

## THE JOY OF THE GAME



In Lynne Rae Perkins's delightful animal fantasy *Nuts to You*, a group of gray squirrels has traveled far (in squirrel terms), only to discover that their friends and families are in danger. Humans are using chainsaws to cut down branches growing near the buzzpaths (powerlines), and the gray squirrel colony is right in the path of destruction. Jed, Tsh-Tsh, and Chai race home to warn everyone. But there's a problem: How are they going to convince their fellow squirrels—stubborn and resistant to change by nature—to get out of harm's way?

To make matters worse, it's autumn—all of the squirrels' winter food stores are threatened, too. But what squirrel would begin to consider moving when instinct is telling them to gather, gather, gather and store, store, store?

The solution turns out to be simple: make it a game. Jed, Tsh-Tsh, and Chai know that squirrels may hate change, but they're highly competitive. None of them can resist a good game and the chance to win. The three friends introduce everyone to a game they call "Move!" The winning team will be the first to successfully move a large number of nuts to a new place in the forest where they can establish another home. Only Jed, Tsh-Tsh, and Chai

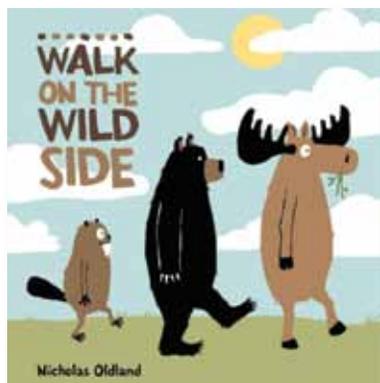
understand how serious the stakes are. To the others, it's simply great fun.

And that, of course, is the appeal of games, at least for some players: the fun of it all. Others are playing to win. But not every game needs to be turned into a competition to be enjoyable. In fact, sometimes competition can ruin a perfectly good time. That's what bunnies Binny, Benny, Bernie, Bonnie, and Buddy discover in Mira Lobe's picture book *Hoppelpopp and the Best Bunny*. The quintet loves being together, and every time one of them starts playing something, the others eagerly join in. But when Hoppelpopp arrives on the scene, he turns everything into a contest. Who is the fastest? The strongest? The smartest? The bravest? The best?

"From that day on, everything changed. The bunnies didn't eat together anymore. They didn't sleep together anymore. And they didn't play together anymore . . . Buddy cried because he wasn't the best at anything." The arrival of an intruder—a badger!—reminds the bunnies that they're better together than apart. "And Hoppelpopp hopped away. He didn't find the best bunny, but he did find five equally good ones."

Competition also comes close to ruining the adventure of a bear, a moose, and a beaver in Nicholas Oldland's droll *Walk on the Wild Side*. The three friends decide their outing to the top of a mountain would be much more exciting if they turned it into a race. The moose has a long-legged lead until he jumps out of the path of a falling boulder. He goes right over the mountain and ends up dangling from a tree branch. "Fearlessly, the bear attempted a daring rescue. Sadly, he failed." The bear winds up in danger, too. Luckily, the moose catches the bear. Unluckily, the beaver hurries right past them, worried his friends are far ahead. But then he hears their cries for help and rushes back to rescue them. The rest of the way up the mountain, they work together, which proves to be much more fun.

What happens when you absolutely, positively do not want to play? In *Henry Holton Takes the Ice* by Sandra Bradley, Henry is a boy born into a hockey-crazed family. His dad plays, his mom plays, and so do his big sister and three cousins. "The only person in Henry's family who didn't play hockey was his grandmother and that was because she'd hurt her hip. Before



that she was voted MVP in the Silver Skates League six years running ... So when Henry was born, there was only one question: *LEFT WING or RIGHT WING?* 'Either way,' said dad. 'By the time he's five he'll be a pro.'

And it seems Henry's dad is right, because Henry takes to skates almost as soon as he can walk. "He swooshed and he swaggered. He didn't even need to hold his dad's hand. 'Henry Holton, you beauty!' Grandma hollered from the bleachers. 'You are going to make one fine hockey player.'"

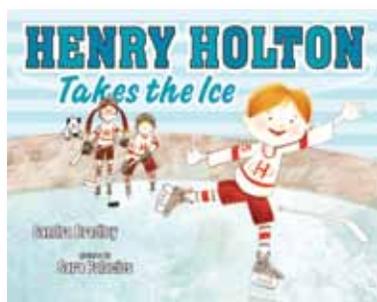
Despite being surrounded by hockey passion, Henry takes no pleasure in the game. At age seven he can skate better "than any Holton in history," but whenever he holds a hockey stick everything falls apart, to the consternation of his sister and devastation of his parents. Then Henry attends an ice-dancing performance. It's a heart-pounding revelation: "There were no sticks, no pucks, no helmets or pads. Only bodies. Moving with the music."

His parents aren't certain about Henry's interest in ice dancing, but Henry himself has no doubts. When they hesitate, he goes on strike; he won't skate at all until he gets skates with toe picks—figure skates. His grandma sees the spark in his eye and brings her old figure skates, even though they're three sizes too big for him. When Henry's parents see his

happiness as he glides across the ice, all doubt disappears. Soon Henry has his own figure skates that fit and a coach. "It took Henry sixty-nine tries before he could dash down the ice, spin like a top, and finish with one foot high in the air. On the sixty-ninth try, Grandma was sitting in the bleachers. 'Henry Holton, you beauty!' she hollered. 'I knew you'd make one fine ice dancer!'"

In contrast to Henry, who has no interest in the rough-and-tumble of hockey, Astrid Vasquez is eager to join the ranks of the junior roller derby in Victoria Jamieson's sparkling graphic novel *Roller Girl*. Unfortunately, Astrid doesn't know how to skate when she begins the training camp. She has to work hard to compete with the more experienced girls. Astrid thought her best friend, Nicole, was going to participate, too, but she has ballet. And as far as Astrid is concerned, Nicole has chosen ballet and a friendship with a girl named Rachel over her.

Astrid's fierce determination serves her well in spite of the challenges she faces. Like Henry and his sixty-nine tries, she's tireless in trying to improve, even though it leaves her exhausted at day's end. As she battles to make it into her first mini-derby, which means not only developing her skills but also coming up with the perfect Derby nickname, she makes some missteps both on and off the track. In the end, she realizes that, win or lose, she competes for the thrill of it.



The same can be said for Zulay in Cari Best's picture book *My Three Best Friends and Me, Zulay*. It comes as a surprise, a few pages into the story, to learn Zulay is blind. She and her three best friends all help one another in class and play together during recess. When the other students go to gym, though, Zulay has to work with Ms. Turner, who is teaching her to walk with a cane. Zulay doesn't want to use a cane, because to her mind it makes her stand out as different. But when their teacher announces an upcoming Field Day, she works hard so she'll be able to participate. When Field Day comes, she is able to run around the track using her cane, with Ms. Turner at her side.

"Run, Zulay, run!" my friends all shout ... So with the wind pushing me and the sun shining me, I feel like that bird that went flying."



**Megan Schliesman** is a librarian at the Cooperative Children's Book Center of the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She can be reached at [schliesman@education.wisc.edu](mailto:schliesman@education.wisc.edu).