

MARI AND JASE'S STORY: HONESTY, ACCEPTANCE, AND YES, SOME KISSING

a review by Jessica L. Allee

Kati Gardner. *Finding Balance*.
Flux, 2020.

JESSICA L. ALLEE is an English PhD student at the University of Arkansas. Her primary research interests are Medical Humanities and helping college students empathize with one another through personal narrative writing.

A Raleigh, NC, resident, **KATI GARDNER** grew up and lived most of her life in Atlanta. She is a cancer survivor and amputee, a wife and mother, an author and teacher, and a Camp Sunshine volunteer and fundraiser.

ABOVE Kati Gardner

Kati Gardner's Young Adult novel *Finding Balance* explores the emotional, physical, and social challenges cancer survivors and people with disabilities face and how finding balance after remission is a unique and personal journey. Inspired by her own cancer diagnosis, amputation, and summers spent at Camp Sunshine, Gardner tells a contemporary love story about Mari Manos and Jase Ellison, two teenage cancer survivors she introduced in her debut novel, *Brave Enough* (reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). While *Finding Balance* is aimed primarily at Young Adult audiences, teenage supporting characters and mature themes also make this novel engaging for adult readers. Furthermore, Gardner conveys poignant insights into the lingering effects of cancer that are minimally explored or completely omitted from other novels about cancer and disability.

Gardner picks up Mari and Jase's story at Camp Chemo, a summer camp for children and Young Adult cancer survivors and their families. A healthy flirtation begins between the pair, and Mari and Jase are smitten – or so it seems – but before they can seal their first kiss, camp ends, and both return to their regular lives. Jase, who doesn't remember having had leukemia at age three, has no physical reminders that set him apart from students at Atlanta West Prep. He avoids being treated differently because his friends don't know he is a cancer survivor. Mari, on the other hand, was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma at ten years old and is an amputee; her missing leg is a constant reminder to herself



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and others that she is different. However, Mari seems to embrace her disability, even if her hip disarticulation makes it difficult to be fitted with a prosthetic leg, even though people sometimes stare and make rude comments about her disability, and even when she is pushed over by two boys, slips on a grape, and is forced to make a choice: use a wheelchair in school, wear an expensive and likely ill-fitting prosthetic, or transfer from South Side High to Atlanta West.

Finding Balance, quite literally, becomes the novel's theme when Mari and Jase must navigate their individual and mutual challenges and attractions at Atlanta West Prep. Jase, afraid that his secret will be spilled if he associates with Mari, makes a difficult decision that could upend his relationship with her. And Mari's strong and capable nature, faced with starting over at a new school, being judged for her disability, and having had cancer, is tested to the tipping point.

It is while Mari navigates a new school, new classes, and new people that Gardner brings a common problem for people with disabilities into focus, being

bullied. Gardner creates a variety of characters that showcase the various types of bullying that goes on in schools: the ignorant and misinformed bullies, the bullies who deliberately single out individuals who are "different," and school administration leaders who treat disabled students differently from other students and yet don't provide equal opportunities for living and learning.

In her novel, Gardner illuminates the lengths to which people with disabilities must go to navigate a broken system. Even tasks that are easy for other students, such as retrieving items from one's locker and getting on and off the bus are difficult for Mari because accommodations do not exist for her. Additionally, the school does not provide enough time for students like Mari to get from class to class; she must leave one class early to get to the next class on time, thereby missing out on instruction that other students receive.

Gardner also explores the consequences of refusing to be honest with oneself. Even though Jase is not physically disabled like Mari, he suffers from the fear of being viewed as different from everyone else.

Jase's fears result in sometimes displaced anger and hurtful actions that threaten to unravel relationships and the world as he knows it. However, with Mari's help and an additional obstacle Gardner places in his path, Jase has opportunities to learn how to be more honest about and accepting of himself and his circumstances.

Gardner offers additional important insights into the lives of cancer survivors and the challenges that they and those around them face: the cost of ongoing medical care, the lingering concern that cancer may return, the worry that being fitted with a prosthetic limb will change everything or that not being fitted will keep everything the same, and finally, the devastating effects cancer treatments can have when one least expects it.

Supporting characters provide additional insights. Mari and Jase's mutual friend, Davis, is a cancer survivor and recovering drug and alcohol addict who volunteers at the hospital as part of his probation and works at the local hangout, the Daily Grind. Noah, who also had osteogenic sarcoma like Mari, is an amputee naively unaware that not all amputations are

alike; Mari cannot be fitted with a prosthetic as easily as he had been. In fact, at one point in the book, Mari tries being fitted and leaves the office feeling like an object rather than a person: "They continued to speak around her. She didn't even have to be there. She was just a body they were going to attach this new part to. They were Dr. Frankenstein, and she was just the greatest experiment" (175).

Camp counselors and medical professionals who support Mari and Jase through their journeys provide readers with new views of the medical system, some parts of which are broken and other parts intact and vitally important. In addition to reading about these characters, Young Adults and adults alike will benefit from getting to know Mari and Jase's parents and family members and how they cope with Mari and Jase's illnesses and disabilities and provide love and support.

While some aspects of Gardner's novel are predictable, some lines clichéd, and a mini army of characters sometimes difficult to keep track of, Gardner provides readers with an engaging and realistic storyline that gives cancer and disability the spotlights they deserve. ■

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