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**Lily and Dunkin** Donna Gephart

**Author Donna Gephart crafts a dual narrative about two remarkable young people: Lily, a transgender girl, and Dunkin, a boy dealing with bipolar disorder.**

Sometimes our hearts see things our eyes can't.

Lily Jo McGrother, born Timothy McGrother, is a girl. But being a girl is not so easy when you look like a boy. Especially when you're in the eighth grade.

Dunkin Dorfman, birth name Norbert Dorfman, is dealing with bipolar disorder and has just moved from the New Jersey town he's called home for the past thirteen years. This would be hard enough, but the fact that he is also hiding from a painful secret makes it even worse.

One summer morning, Lily Jo McGrother meets Dunkin Dorfman, and their lives forever change.

## Lily and Dunkin Details

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Author : Donna Gephart

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Genre : Childrens, Middle Grade, Lgbt, Young Adult, Realistic Fiction, Fiction, Mental Health, Mental  
Illness

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## From Reader Review *Lily and Dunkin* for online ebook

### Gary Anderson says

If I could hand one book to every educator and school board member in America and say, "I think you should read this," it would be *Lily and Dunkin* by Donna Gephart. In the early pages, we learn that Lily is a girl trapped in a boy's body. Named Timothy at birth because of the presence of "boy parts," Lily wants her gender identification to be accepted by her friends and family, some of whom support her, while others struggle to see her for who she really is. Gephart handles this material masterfully, with humor, insight, and compassion. Dunkin is the new kid in town, and he also has some identity issues (unrelated to his gender), which Gephart reveals more slowly but no less artfully. Lily and Dunkin's off-and-on friendship as they enter eighth grade is authentically depicted, and the various ways that people in their lives support or torment them convey emotions that many young people bravely carry around with them daily. I know this little review is short on specifics, but you don't want me to spoil the powerful reading experience that awaits you in this beautiful, important novel.

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### Stacey says

*Lily and Dunkin* is a brave book. The author takes on the challenge of having her reader walk in the shoes of not one, but two characters whose experiences and true identities are attempting to break the surface.

The story is raw, emotional, funny and at times unforgiving with its honesty. There were moments when I literally could feel my heart expanding, pushing up against the walls of itself, to grow bigger.

I know that I am a better human because I have experienced *Lily and Dunkin*. Donna Gephart, "words have the power to change the world. Use them carefully."

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### Danielle (iamhorriblylimited) says

If you read one middle grade book this year please make it this one.

Lily:

transgender

formerly Tim

thinks her father hates her for who she is

just trying to be herself

bullied at school

Dunkin:

actually named Norbert

hears voices

bipolar

recently lost his father to suicide

moved to Beckford Palms with his Mom after his father's death.

Bob:  
beautiful banyan tree outside Beckford Palms Library  
Lily's refuge  
Happy memories of family picnics under this tree  
Soon to be removed from the park.

Dunkin is new to Beckford Palms, and will soon be starting school at Gator Lake Middle. He sees this beautiful, blue eyed girl while walking home and he is captivated by her.

Lily, transgender, is making small steps to embrace her true self, which means defying her father who is refusing to allow Lily to start hormone blockers.

This novel is a beautiful and heartbreaking story about not fitting in, having secrets, making true friends, and not being afraid to be yourself even if you are bullied. I truly hope you take the time to read it. You won't be disappointed.

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### **Alex Flinn says**

I really enjoyed this book because, in addition to dealing with the important topic of transgender teens in a middle grade novel, it also dealt effectively with bipolar disorder. I have two relatives with bipolar disorder (or, rather, one -- my cousin committed suicide at what seemed to be a great point in his life), and as well as a child who is on medication for another condition. It is often frustrating to deal with someone who obviously needs to be on medication yet repeatedly doesn't take it, to their great detriment. With Norbert's character, Donna Gephardt, who has a son with bipolar disorder, really did a great job of explaining Norbert's self-talk and how he justified his decision not to take the meds, even when he was being tested for taking them, even when he was frustrating the heck out of his devoted family. It really made me sympathize, if not agree, and it accurately portrayed the frustration of having to take medication just to be "normal," which others take for granted and even stigmatize people for having to take. While I guessed the secret of Norbert's father early on, a reader the correct age for the book probably wouldn't. I also thought that, and the family's journey, was sensitively portrayed.

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### **Kathleen Bianchi says**

Bought this for my 11yr old granddaughter and will be interested to discuss it with her after she gets to read it. I thought it was interesting and gave good insight into the transgender girl's feelings. The type of bi-polar disorder they were showing was not your typical one this one included psychosis it doesn't usually so I don't know if I would have chosen that one to present.

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### **C. L. says**

Well.

On one hand, kudos for representation. On the other... I can't speak for the transgender side of the story, but the bipolar one? As a bipolar person, it kind of bothered me. The author was supposedly writing about her son's experiences -- and everyone's experience is different -- but it didn't ring true for me, in what could potentially be a damaging way. The symptoms Dunkin experiences are more in line with schizophrenia than

classic bipolar. So to define bipolar as hearing voices and blocking out substantial parts of your life...

This is where my issue lies. When I was the age these characters are -- the age I would have likely been reading this book, had it come out at that time -- the story would have reaffirmed my misconceptions about bipolar disorder: that it was functionally the same as schizophrenia. And a large number of the problems I suffered were rooted in those misconceptions. I didn't hear voices or hallucinate, therefore, I wasn't *\*really\** mentally ill and didn't need treatment. I just needed to quit whining and snap out of it. (Spoiler alert: that didn't work.) So I worry about the kids who will read this book, kids who *\*are\** sick and *\*do\** need treatment, but will take this description of bipolar as confirmation that there's nothing really wrong with them.

Still, like I said, there's something to be said for representation. Guardedly recommended.

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## Erica says

karen wrote a superb review for *If I Was Your Girl*, a YA romance featuring a trans teenager. In said review, karen states that the reader's enjoyment of the book in question should come after the acknowledgement of how important the work is because it's filling a gap that desperately needs representation (to grossly and ineloquently paraphrase)

I've been sitting on this review for months because of that very conundrum. I understand this is an important work because it addresses topics generally not discussed in middle grade/juvenile books. But that very fact is what kept me from enjoying the story. This book addresses *several* topics which then keeps any single issue from being discussed in depth and, to me, that undermined the importance of this book.

There are two main big topics in this tale.

The first centers on Lily who wants to start hormone therapy before puberty kicks up the testosterone, making hair grow on her face, making her testicles drop, changing her voice, etc. Her mother and sister are trying to get Lily the help she needs but her father is an obstacle. He's worried his son is going to be teased and bullied for wanting to be a girl, which I will discuss further later on.

The other main topic centers on Norbert, coined "Dunkin'" by Lily when they first meet, and his tribulations with moving to a new school while simultaneously dealing with his bipolar disorder.

Those are pretty intense things to examine and this isn't a YA novel so the language is simpler and the ideas are more encompassing, yet concrete, because there's not a lot of room for the nuance you might find in books for older readers. The focus should have remained on these two big issues being experienced by these two kids in order to give each topic as in-depth an examination as possible. However, in an effort to make said kids seem more developed, to round 'em out, there are several sub-issues thrown in. Lily is trying to save an old tree that reminds her of her grandfather; it's scheduled to be cut down to make room for a park. Also, she's noticing all the pink flamingos that have been popping up on lawns throughout her gated community. Mystery! Meanwhile, new-kid-Norbert is ignoring the undisclosed thing that happened to his father and watching his mother slowly heal from said undisclosed thing. His grandmother is a health nut who wants to help her family be healthier. Norbert wants to be a basketball star in order to be part of something but doing so means he has to make some poor decisions. Bullying is addressed, the meaning of friendship is addressed (and, by the way, I did not buy Lily's and Norbert's friendship at all. It rang horribly false), support, compassion, and grief are addressed. This is a short book and that's a lot to have going on. These side issues, while real-to-life, distract from the two main issues, downplaying them not only for the

characters but for the reader, as well.

It's been a quarter of a year since I finished this book and I know I read the notes at the end of the story but I'm not sure I remember them correctly. To the best of my recollection, the author is not trans nor is she the parent or guardian of a trans child. I believe she immersed herself in research regarding trans children in order to get a base from which to write Lily's story.

I am also not transgender nor am I the parent or guardian of a trans child. I don't even know if I know any trans youth. I can't speak for that community. I can speak, broadly (ha!) and in general, for women, though, as I am one and have deep relationships with many others. The thing about Lily being a girl is that she defines herself in terms of stereotypical girl behavior in that she knows she's a girl because she likes pretty things, she wants to wear dresses, and she doesn't like the thought of growing hair "down there." (Is that to say a grown woman doesn't have hair "down there"? Because guess what? Pubic hair grows on adults, no matter their sex. Why doesn't this kid know that?) There's a whole discussion going on about how transgender women may potentially be working against the progress of feminism because, too often and especially in the media, transgender women choose to espouse stereotypical feminine attributes - the makeup and hair, the heels and feminine dress, the hip sway and smiles - and are, thus, retro-defining womanhood because they're showing that if you become a woman, you check those boxes and then you're accepted as a woman, which, yeah, it makes sense. Only, women have been trying to get rid of those boxes for so long, to make them into options rather than defaults, to be women as people, not women because of expectations, and it sucks that people who formerly had male privilege are showing us how women should look and act. No, no, of course this is not an across-the-board thing. There are plenty of everyday transwomen who wear jeans and t-shirts or hipster-wear or the same kinds of things I wear, who don't giggle and wiggle when they walk, who don't wear look-at-my-feminineness makeup, who aren't working in traditional female occupations, who aren't advancing the stereotype but that's not the example we see in this book. Readers get the former example, the girly example, the message that says if you identify as female, you manifest that identity in a certain and specific way, namely dresses and lipstick, crying a lot, backing down from fights, demure behavior brought about by the stifling of emotions, and thinking boys might be cute. It's not a personal choice, it's an evolutionary mandate. So what does that say to transgender kids who don't fit a stereotype? That they're doing it wrong? And what does it say to kids who don't or won't conform to gender standards? That they're wrong, too? And what about Lily's best friend who is less girly than Lily? (view spoiler) There is also the financial consideration. As I mentioned before, Lily lives in a gated community. Her posh neighborhood is mentioned several times and she's embarrassed to be so well-off. But the thing is, because she's well-off, she has the opportunity to get her hormone blockers. Her family can afford the therapy she needs to transition her body from male puberty to female puberty. This isn't something every trans pre-teen can do, I doubt many families could afford this for their children. So what then? Those not-rich kids get to re-experience just how unfair it is that well-off white kids get to be who they are while everyone else has to fumble through best they can?

And then there's Lily's dad. He's worried his son, Timothy, as he calls her, will be cruelly mocked and bullied in school because kids prey on those who are different. Most of us went to school, we know how this works. Maybe because this isn't a YA novel, the father couldn't have been more specific in his worries, couldn't bring up any of the news stories in which transteens are killed by classmates, couldn't vocalize why he was so concerned that his kid might be treated poorly by peers. Now, again, I don't have kids so maybe it doesn't really work this way, but I was surprised that neither of the parents seemed interested in giving their child tools to combat potential bullying situations. I mean, I suppose no parent tells their kid "Don't hit unless someone else hits you first" anymore and that's probably backward thinking anyway. Whatever the case, in this story, the parents did very little to prepare their kid for the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, choosing to leave that up to future therapists, I suppose. And that's a shame because Lily is bullied anyhow, even before she starts to transition and she handles it by ignoring it and hoping it will eventually stop. What other option does she have? It's not like she's been shown how to fight back or to protect herself.

The reader isn't shown that, either, and, again, if this were for older kids, that would be fine because, hopefully, older kids would already have some coping mechanisms in place. Middle grade, though? I had hoped to see better support for Lily which could translate into support for readers who are trying to find the help they don't have in their own lives.

While the author does not seem to have first-hand experience with trans children, she does have a child with bipolar disorder and has experienced the effects of medications, the many doctors visits, the frustrations, and the moments of triumph that come with parenting a child with a mood disorder and she used that knowledge as the base for Norbert's story.

I am nowhere near as versed in the disorder, especially not in how it manifests in children, but I do have some familiarity, in general. The author is relying heavily on her own experience with her child and that's great. Unfortunately, it's also incredibly specific. Dunkin exhibits symptoms that are not common in the bipolar spectrum. The author actually accounts for this. In her notes, she says she has studied mental illness and admits: *While there are commonalities and patterns in behaviors, the illness presents uniquely in each individual...While his behaviors and symptoms may not be typical of people with bipolar disorder, it is possible for the illness to manifest this way.* That's true. It's also true that this is a book for a middle-grade audience and it's doing them a disservice to make a disability mostly unrelatable by making it so extreme. How are kids supposed to identify with someone like them if they don't recognize what that character is going through?

Oh, this book. It's important in that it features voices that aren't normally heard but is it helpful?

To some, of course it will be. Of course! But to many others, it could be even more alienating. I appreciate that this story and others like it are opening doors but, in this case, I feel that the message is "The door is open but you have to be this tall to go through" and that kind of exclusion is exactly what we're trying to move away from.

I can't say I would recommend this, especially not to its intended audience.

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## **Wendy Darling says**

Book 3 for GLBT Book Month.

Audiobook narrated by Ryan Gesell and Michael Crouch (along with an author's note), who do an excellent job of portraying Lily and Dunkin. This is a pretty straightforward story; it's kind of cute at first, and transgender rep is definitely very much needed, particularly in MG. (I'm also curious about how some of the bipolar symptoms manifest, which I wasn't familiar with before.)

But neither kid's story ended up being as insightful or emotional or compelling as I'd hoped, and somehow the voice never struck me as sounding hugely authentic. Sometimes the voice sounded true, particularly in Dunkin's humor, but I was very conscious of the adult writing the story in other parts. It's not even being spoiled by books like *George*, which was written by a transgender person; there are plenty of middle grade books written by adults that didn't strike me this way. There was also a bit of a tonal disconnect for me--the kids are in seventh grade, which I think is usually younger YA age? But the language and plot and emotions and characters made it feel like a middle grade book (which also seemed to be how it's marketed). Aside from a couple of different elements that could've been tweaked, it sits firmly in grade school in my mind.

It's a very positive book, and it's a positive thing that it exists and perhaps might be of some help to a child going through similar experiences. I especially appreciated the frank discussion of hormones and other

particulars that you don't always see, and any book that might open a kid's heart to empathy and compassion is something I'm all for. But if you've read a fair amount of glbt lit, or even a lot of contemporary fiction for kids, this might not be a book that leaves a huge impact.

*An audio review copy was provided by the publisher.*

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### **Paul Orsino says**

I absolutely adore this book. Lily and Dunkin have incredibly honest and true voices.

I truly believe that reading this has made me a more empathetic and understanding person.

This book will change the lives of readers, we need to make sure it finds its way into their hands.

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### **Clare Lund says**

I LOVED Lily and Dunkin's simultaneous narrations of the same scene and the important struggles each separately went through in this beautiful story. It's so critical for kids to see themselves reflected in what they read, and this book helps fill a gap in middle grade literature about transgender kids, mental illness, and acceptance. All characters were so rich and well developed, and Lily's mom and sister ROCK with their immediate acceptance and embrace of her. Her dad's journey is the one that had me in tears at the end though. Could be read by mature kids as young as 10.

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### **Aryana Parmar says**

I think this book was good, but I had a really hard time connecting with the characters and all the things going on. I don't know, not a bad book, but most definitely not for me.

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### **Valentine says**

Alright ladies and gents, buckle up because this is going to be a wild ride of me professing my undying love for this book and probably making no sense.

Before I dive into the review, I just want to say I didn't expect to love this book so much. I never thought it would resonate so deep into me, and that it would shake me to this extent. Thing is, it's almost everything I usually don't reach for: character driven, contemporary middle grade with young narrators. But since it dealt with some serious issues, I thought I would give it a try. Now that I read it, I can't imagine my world without it, and here is why:

#### **1)The characters**



Let me be crystal clear: Lily and Dunkin are now my children. They are my everything. They're the sweetest, most adorable and beautiful people ever, and they deserve the world. Let me explain. First of all, they are really, really interesting characters to follow. You get both their points of view in a book that has neither chapters nor mentions of who's speaking at the moment. Yet, you can immediately tell who's speaking, because they are so different. They are similar yes, that's why they become friends, but they're not bland, dull characters who are difficult to discern. They're three dimensional, realistic people and I personally couldn't help myself from getting attached to them from the very first pages.

Another thing that made me love the book is the *parents*. I usually either hate or don't care for them in middle grade/YA books, but there, they were incredibly interesting. For once, they discuss with their children, and the children actually reach out to them when they have problems. Even if they do keep secrets because they think it's the best for them, they always end up seeking the help of someone! Literally AMEN! I loved, loved, loved Lily's mom and her sister, they both try their best to understand and care for her; and I shall not forget Lily's best friend who supports her at every moment! Even his dad, who begins the story by being reluctant and skeptical slowly grows and learns to love his daughter for who she is. It's the same with Dunkin's mother and grandmother, they care immensely for him and try their best to protect and love him! Thing is, none of the characters are either white or black, good or bad. They all have nuances, and some of them (like Lily's dad) have the best character growth I've ever seen! You see "good" characters making bad choices and mistakes and you see "bad" characters suffering or feeling really deep, human emotions. This books really shows that human nature is not so easy to understand!

## 2) The representation

*Here is the good stuff!* I had already read a few books with transgender characters, even if they are very few. Now, it's definitely not the same for mental illness. I have no memory of ever reading a book portraying a mentally ill main character. And that makes that book very, very important.

Not only does it portray so many aspects of life that are often so invisible in media, it does it **WELL**. The way the author wrote this story about two characters from minorities with such respect is just astonishing. I knew quite a lot about transgender people, but my knowledge of bipolar disorder was pretty much inexistant. And this book just makes you want to know and care more, because you get so invested in the characters' lives and fears and joys. I made quite a lot of research to see if the portrayal of bipolar disorder was realistic, and I can definitely assure you it is. Just like with Lily's story, it's respectful but it's not sugar-coated: it shows the truth, the really truth without diminishing the character's pain or painting them into nothing but their condition. **They're much more than that.**

## The feelings

Before I say anything, I have to tell I'm a very sensitive person and reader. I often react out loud or tear up when a book gets emotional. But I only ever really cried for two books in my entire life. Yet, it was nothing compared to what happened when I finished *Lily and Dunkin*.

The book itself was already a wild roller-coaster of emotion: I found myself smiling and laughing out loud because it was so sweet and adorable, but I also found myself tearing up hundreds of times because it was sad, or because it was just so, so beautiful. But what really broke me in a thousands pieces was the ending. (view spoiler) My eyes were already blurry at that point and I had wailed like a maniac several times before, but at that moment I literally BURST into tears and when I closed the book, I couldn't stop sobbing uncontrollably for five minutes. As I said, I had already cried for books, but it was silent tears, not huge, gross crying followed by an hour of sniffing and staring into space, thinking of how much this book changed

me. Because **it did**. It literally changed me as a reader and a person, and I don't think I will let go of it so soon.

So yeah, you get the picture. This is not just a good book, it's a masterpiece in my opinion. It's both really interesting unlike many books that deals with serious topic, and are just depressing for the sake of being depressing (but don't actually make you think or feel); and beautiful. It's well-written, the characters are realistic and lovable, and it's packed with emotion in a way I've never seen before! And again, the portrayal of transgender people and mental illness is so, so respectful! The fact that this book is meant for children just warms my heart with hope. That's what the world needs, diverse and important stories spreading everywhere and reaching people of all ages.

You get it, I just adored this book to death. ?

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### **Franki Sibberson says**

A great story. Great characters. Thinking it's perfect for middle school --seems like one of those books that fits somewhere between middle grade and YA.

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### **Nancy Kotkin says**

This is a book about a transgendered kid and another kid afflicted with bipolar disorder. That is an awful lot to take on in one middle grade novel and, as a result, both characters suffered. Neither character was fully realized, but the friendship between the two major characters was especially weak. For most of the book, Lily pines over Dunkin while Dunkin snubs Lily in favor of more cool and popular, albeit demanding and mean, friends at school.

My biggest concern about this book is the way bipolar disorder is portrayed, because it is erroneous. Bipolar disorder does not cause psychosis. The author says she based the character of Dunkin on her son, and that his bipolar disorder manifested in this way. There are a couple issues with that. First, since bipolar disorder does not cause psychosis, there would be a secondary diagnosis to account for the symptoms of psychosis seen in the character of Dunkin. Just as it is possible for a person to have two physical illnesses exist simultaneously, it is also possible to have two mental illnesses manifest simultaneously. But there is no mention in the book of Dunkin having any mental illness other than bipolar disorder, so readers will incorrectly assume that Dunkin's psychotic symptoms are caused by his bipolar disorder.

Second, it is rare to see symptoms of psychosis in a person with bipolar disorder. Since mental illness is rarely covered in middle grade novels, this rare manifestation of bipolar disorder will be seen by most readers, who will lack the knowledge to question this, as the typical course of bipolar disorder when it is not.

There are also problems with the portrayal of Dunkin's psychotropic medication. It is correct that Dunkin would be on a "mood stabilizer" for his bipolar disorder and on an anti-psychotic drug for his symptoms of psychosis. It is also true that the anti-psychotic drug could likely cause some sluggishness as a side effect. When Dunkin decides to discontinue his anti-psychotic medicine but continues taking his "mood stabilizer," he becomes increasingly manic as well as psychotic; but the "mood stabilizer" alone would continue to control his bipolar symptoms.

Also, it takes weeks (not days) for psychotropic medications to build up, and to release, from the blood stream, meaning that discontinuation of a psychotropic medication would cause symptoms to return gradually over the course of a few weeks, often as many as six weeks or even more; psychiatric patients rarely deteriorate so completely in just a few days. Finally, medication compliance is a common issue among psychiatric patients (due to all the unpleasant side effects) and no psychiatrist would be so easily fooled as the one in this book. Nor would the mom be so easily duped, especially having been through something similar with her husband already.

Not all people with mental illness hear voices or talk to themselves; only a small percentage of psychiatric patients experience psychotic symptoms. Many psychotropic medications have serious side effects, which is the main reason for medication noncompliance - not just because someone decides he needs to score more points in a basketball game. I'm not sure why the author chose to have the police drag Dunkin off the basketball court, rather than have a nurse and his mother escort him to the school nurse's office and then call an ambulance to take him to the hospital. The author's choices in this book do more to perpetuate negative stereotypes of mental illness, which is especially unfortunate in a book for children.

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### **\*eKa\* says**

Lily and Dunkin is a thoughtful and heartwarming story of two teenagers going through transgender and bipolar disorder. Tim/Lily has to deal with his unmatched physical body while Norbert/Dunkin has to deal with his mood swing and his gigantic body. They're new to each other and don't always picture together because they have their own lives and their own close people. But in the end they're helping each other out and be best friend forever.

This book shows me the meaning of a family, friendship, of being different and most of all, acceptance. I could feel how sincere this book is written since the author also has a son with bipolar disorder. It's not easy. I can see it. But I'm glad that both Lily and Dunkin is surrounded by people who love them just the way they are and they are so supportive. Well, there is always a bump in the road. And that's what mostly happened to Lily and Dunkin at school.

I really enjoyed reading this book since the very first page. It was easy to read and to digest. Plus, it also has its funny moment and amazing plot twist. And it broke my heart. The author didn't really tell about the therapy session and all that related to what Lily and Dunkin suffers, but she tells more about the emotional side of Lily and Dunkin. It's still great. And unless you don't own tear duct, you'll definitely shed tears. I do recommend this book to everyone.

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