Bruiser by Neal Shusterman

When I picked up Shusterman's *Bruiser* [1], I expected to read a book about an angry kid who taunts and punches away his insecurities. While this book does deal with bullies, Brewster, the character of the title, is almost the opposite of a bully and a bit magical to boot. A hulking and shabbily dressed 16-year-old, Brewster is an outsider who people vote to be the Most Likely to Go to Jail, and generally treat as if he's not there. Which suits him fine, even if he's never stepped on an ant, because he takes on the physical and emotional pain of anyone he gets close to. Twin 16-year-olds Bronte and Tennyson learn this when they discover the scars and bruises that cover his body, and meet his abusive uncle. Their parents are going through a bitter separation, and the two deal with their frustration and pain in different ways. Tennyson is a bully and lets off steam playing lacrosse, while Bronte swims and makes turning Brewster into a popular student her project. As both siblings grow closer to Brewster, they find themselves feeling better physically and emotionally, and eventually even their parents seem to be getting along again. But the same mysterious force that is healing this family seems to be killing Brewster, and the race is on to see whether the twins will realize it before it's too late.

The magical elements of this story are never explained, but it doesn't matter, because this book is really about relationships - family, friends, and romantic partners - and all of the confusion and pain that go along with security and joy. It asks the question of whether you can be happy without pain in life, and whether you can love without making sacrifices. The teen characters are realistic and the story is alternately told in their three distinct voices (Brewster's in poetry). It's a character-driven and fast-paced read that should appeal to fans of Shusterman's *Unwind* [2] and *The Schwa Was Here* [3], and was nominated for the 2012-13 Rosie Award [4]. For another book dealing with child abuse with a more plot-centered story, try Ilsa Bick's *Drowning Instinct* [5], about a damaged young woman whose relationship with a teacher goes from supportive to a much darker reality. *Everybody Sees Ants* [6], by A. S. King,

also deals with bullying, but is a much lighter and funnier read, while James Preller's *Bystander* [7] is told from the perspective not of a bully or a person being bullied, but from one of the "lucky ones" who stand and watch, and are forced to make heartbreaking choices. Sarah Dessen's *What Happened to Goodbye* [8] looks at divorce and the desire to reinvent oneself rather than face painful life changes. All of these books are good follow-ups to *Bruiser*, or alternatives if you're not into stories with unexplained phenomena.

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