

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATE MESSNER

The Trouble with Heroes

"Unique, timely,
and enthralling."

—Newbery Honor-winning
author Renée Watson



BLOOMSBURY

“The pitch-perfect tween voice spills out of the poetry with raw authenticity. Any tween who’s ever lost someone, made bad choices, or felt unworthy of love will identify with Finn.”

—**Kip Wilson, award-winning author of *White Rose***

“As always, Kate Messner writes with an acute understanding of the emotional lives of today’s kids, and her respect for readers shines on every page. Messner is the Judy Blume of a new generation.”

—**Anne Ursu, author of *Not Quite a Ghost***

“Pack your tissues and hold onto your hearts as Finn sweeps you into a tale that traverses the peaks and valleys of adolescence, of life, of grief, of growth.”

—**K.A. Holt, award-winning author of *House Arrest***

“A masterpiece . . . Part funny, part fascinating, and fully rooted in a deep emotional soul, readers of all kinds will be rooting for Finn Connelly with everything they’ve got.”

—**Ann Braden, award-winning author of *Flight of the Puffin***

“Finn’s journey will speak to every kid who’s felt the weight of the world on their shoulders.”

—**Laura Shovan, award-winning author of *Takedown***

“Magnificent and moving. *The Trouble with Heroes* is a triumph—as healing and inspiring as the view from a mountain peak.”

—**Julie Berry, New York Times bestselling author of *Lovely War*, and owner, Author’s Note, a Bookstore**

“Messner’s *The Trouble with Heroes* opens your heart up, breaks it into pieces, and knits it back together again.”

—**Katherine Sokolowski, 7th grade teacher**

“In true Messner fashion, Finn’s story offers company to young people as they make sense of life’s complexities.”

—**Melissa Guerrette, NBCT, 5th grade teacher,
Oxford, ME**



What makes a hero?



"In *The Trouble with Heroes*, Kate Messner reminds us that there is no such thing as a lost cause."

—Kellee Moye, middle school librarian
& 2024 ALAN President

"A glowing love letter to the Adirondack Mountains and the healing powers that live there."

—Rachel Person, Northshire Bookstore

"*The Trouble with Heroes* brings readers up and down the Adirondack mountains with tenderness, toughness, humor, and heroics."

—Karen Armstrong, Children's Librarian,
Lake Placid Public Library

"A captivating, perfectly tuned middle grade read from cover to cover. Finn's journey is complex, as our middle grade children are, and his transformation in the subtleties is perfection."

—Pernille Ripp, educator & creator of
the Global Read Aloud

"A toppingly unique story that will have readers hooked from the first page."

—Kimbra Power, the Barefoot Librarian

"I both laughed out loud and cried at various parts of the book. The epistolary format of this book will be sure to engage all types of readers."

—Rebecca Sofferman, middle school librarian,
Colchester, VT

"This is a story that unboxes the spaces where heartbreak and loss are contained, walks us through the darkest cloud-shadowed valleys of grief, and guides us to the highest summits of hope and healing."

—Aliza Werner, educator and consultant

"I laughed out loud and shed some tears—there is much in this book for every reader."

—Kira Wizner, Merritt Bookstore

"I just finished *The Trouble with Heroes* with tears in my eyes. Adirondackers will appreciate the history incorporated into this book, but folks who have never stepped foot in our mountains will still feel right at home."

—Sarah Galvin, Bookstore Plus

"A healing journey you won't soon forget."

—Beth Wagner, White Birch Books

"Humorous, heartbreaking, and uplifting."

—Alyssa Raymond, Copper Dog Books

"An emotional journey of healing, humor, and hope, and there's a dog story for good measure."

—Trish Brown, One More Page Books

"Finn's healing journey is one not to be missed."

—Jen Kraar, City of Asylum Pittsburgh

"A profoundly touching story in verse of grief, the power of community, and the healing agent of nature."

—Pam Page, Pages the Bookstore

"Readers will relish every step and delicious morsel of Finn and Seymour's journey as they grapple with obstacles both physical and mental. Messner captures Finn's inner monologue with wit, warmth, and just the right amount of snark. *The Trouble with Heroes* is a testament to the power of showing up."

—Megan Estey Butterfield, Youth Library Manager

One summer.

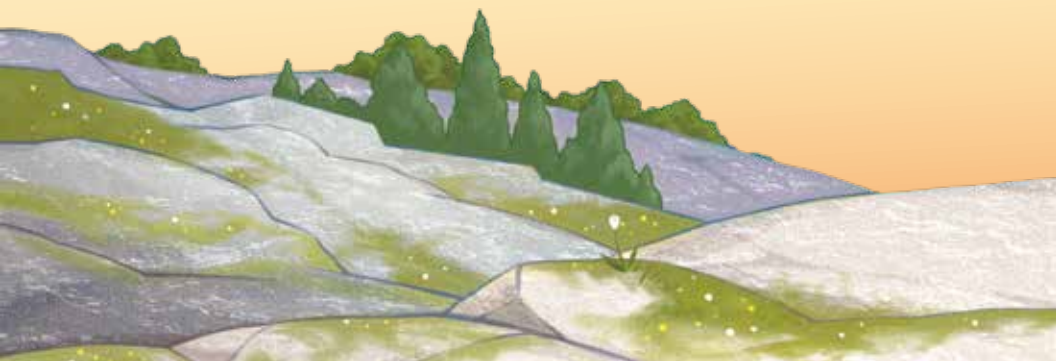
46 mountain peaks.

A second chance to make things right.

Finn Connelly is nothing like his dad, a star athlete and firefighter hero who always ran toward danger until he died two years ago. Finn's about to fail seventh grade and has never made headlines . . . until now.

Caught on camera vandalizing a cemetery, he's in big trouble for kicking down some dead old lady's headstone. But it turns out that grave belongs to a legendary local mountain climber, and her daughter makes Finn an unusual offer: climb all forty-six Adirondack High Peaks with her dead mother's dog, and they can call it even.

In a wild three months of misadventures, mountain mud, and unexpected mentors, Finn begins to find his way on the trails. At the top of each peak, he can see for miles and slowly begins to understand more about himself and his dad. But the mountains don't care about any of that, and as the clock ticks down to September, they have more surprises in store. Finn's final summit challenge may be more than even a hero can face.



BLOCKBUSTER MARKETING & PUBLICITY CAMPAIGN

Extensive independent bookseller outreach
Major national trade and consumer advertising
campaign
Extensive social media promotion and TikTok
and Instagram tours
Major digital influencer outreach
Backlist ebook sales promotions
7–9-City national author tour
with school visits
National review coverage
Major school and library promotion



Praise for Kate Messner

Chirp

An IndieNext Pick • An Amazon Best Book of the Month • A School Library Journal Best Book of the Year • A Pennsylvania Young Readers Choice Award Nominee • A New England Book Award Shortlist

“Strikes the perfect balance of joy, pain, and strength.”

—**Laurie Halse Anderson, bestselling author of *Speak and Shout***

★ “A must purchase.”

—***School Library Connection*, starred review**

★ “Comforts and inspires.”

—***Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

★ “Rich, timely, and beautifully written.”

—***Kirkus Reviews*, starred review**

★ “A deliciously layered concoction of mystery, friend bonding, and girl power.”

—***Shelf Awareness*, starred review**

★ “A riveting middle grade novel of empowerment that deftly tackles a delicate, imperative subject.”

—***BookPage*, starred review**

Breakout

An IndieNext Pick

★ “An effective, authentically wrought look at how fear and ignorance can lead people to treat those of different races or from different places with suspicion.”

—***Publishers Weekly*, starred review**

★ “An accessible format and a unique focus on contemporary issues of criminal justice and racial bias.”

—***School Library Journal*, starred review**

The Exact Location of Home

★ “A moving, hopeful, STEM-related tale.”

—***Kirkus Reviews*, starred review**

★“An accessible and enlightening read.”
—*School Library Journal*, **starred review**

The Seventh Wish

A Kirkus Best Book of the Year • An NPR Best Book of the Year
• An NCTE Charlotte Huck Award Recommended Book

★“Hopeful, empathetic, and unusually enlightening.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, **starred review**

All the Answers

An Iowa Children's Choice Award Nominee • A Virginia Readers' Choice Award Nominee • A Keystone to Reading Book Award Nominee

“A charming, moving, funny, and ultimately very surprising story.”
—**Wendy Mass**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *11 Birthdays*

Wake Up Missing

A Maine Student Book Award List • A Pennsylvania Young Reader's Choice Awards List • An IRA Children's and Young Adult's Book Award Honor Book • A Great Stone Face Award List (Children's Librarians of New Hampshire) • A Louisiana Young Reader's Choice Award List

“A fascinating concept with page-turning suspense.”
—**Margaret Peterson Haddix**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Missing* and the *Shadow Children* series

“Mystery, intrigue, danger, and creepy futuristic science set in today's world? Yes, please.”

—**Lisa McMann**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Unwanted*s series

“Had me on the edge of my seat—I couldn't turn the pages fast enough!”

—**Carrie Ryan**, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Infinity Ring* series

She'll Drop All the Charges

I don't have to go to court.

I won't get sent to juvie.

Don't even have to pay for a new headstone.

There's just one thing she wants me to do:
climb mountains.

Stand on every Adirondack summit
over four thousand feet,
and hike them *all* this summer.

Twelve weeks.

46 peaks.

Finish by Labor Day
and all the charges
go away.

—from *The Trouble with Heroes*

BLOOMSBURY PUBLISHING

TITLE: The Trouble with Heroes

AUTHOR: Kate Messner

ISBN: 978-1-5476-1639-8

FORMAT: hardcover middle-grade novel

TRIM: 5 1/2" x 8 1/4"

PRICE: \$17.99 U.S./\$23.99 CAN.

PUB DATE: April 29, 2025

TENTATIVE PAGE COUNT: 368

AGES: 9-14

GRADES: 4-8

CONTACT: ChildrensPublicityUSA@bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY



All specifications are provisional. This proof should not be quoted without comparison to the final corrected text. It does not reflect the quality, page size, or thickness of the finished book. This galley was printed in the U.S.A.

The Trouble with Heroes

Novels by Kate Messner

The Brilliant Fall of Gianna Z.

Sugar and Ice

Eye of the Storm

Wake Up Missing

All the Answers

The Seventh Wish

The Exact Location of Home

Breakout

Chirp

The Trouble with Heroes

KATE MESSNER

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS, and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America in April 2025
by Bloomsbury Children's Books

Text copyright © 2025 by Kate Messner
Illustrations copyright © 2025 by [TK]

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or
by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information
storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Bloomsbury books may be purchased for business or promotional use.
For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and
Premium Sales Department at specialmarkets@macmillan.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available upon request
ISBN 978-1-5476-1639-8 (hardcover) • ISBN 978-1-5476-1640-4 (e-book)

Book design by Jeanette Levy
Typeset by [typesetter name]
Printed and bound in the U.S.A.
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

To find out more about our authors and books visit
www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

For my hiking buddy Marsha Trombly
(Adirondack 46er #15160)

The Trouble with Heroes

If I were a better kid, this story would begin with my seventh-grade diploma. Instead, it starts with this.

SATURDAY, MAY 28, 2022

Adirondack Daily News

LOCAL CEMETERY VANDALIZED

A local youth has been arrested for vandalizing St. Mary's Cemetery over the holiday weekend. Lake Placid Police responded to a complaint of someone kicking headstones shortly after 4:00 p.m. on Friday.

Upon arrival, police found one headstone knocked over, detached from its base, and seriously damaged. It marked the final resting place of Edna Grace Thomas, longtime corresponding secretary for the Adirondack 46ers and one of the first women to climb all 46 Adirondack High Peaks.

Surveillance camera images led investigators to a juvenile suspect, who has been charged with criminal mischief and released into their parent's custody, pending a court appearance next week.

I'm sorry, okay?

School is important.
It's bad to damage headstones.
This is a haiku.

In case you haven't
already figured it out
I'm the "local youth."

Who would have guessed that
cemetery surveillance
was even a thing?

Captured on camera.
Front page of the newspaper:
VANDAL. CRIMINAL.

Next time I do this
I'll be smarter. And not wear
Dad's old baseball cap.

Everyone's seen me
in that FDNY hat.
Mystery solved. Case closed.

And yeah. I do know
haikus are supposed to be
nature-y, somehow.

When I kicked the stone
birds were chirping in the rain
like they were laughing.

The Trouble with Vandalism

You can't kick over a headstone
if it's the cheap kind,
the small, squat, low-to-the-lawn kind
engraved with the name
of somebody who used to be a hero.

The only kind a family can afford
in the middle of a pandemic,
when tourists aren't visiting
and Gram's chocolate shop is closed
but it doesn't matter anyway.
Nobody shows up
to say goodbye.

You can't hold a funeral
in the middle of a pandemic.
You can only have Gram and Mom and me

and our neighbors
Mr. and Mrs. Park

standing six feet apart
in the rain.

If you knew anything about physics
and the density of rocks and stuff,
if you knew anything about anything,
you'd know when you kick a headstone like that
it doesn't tumble and crash the way you want,
with a giant thud thundering up to the clouds
to let God know how mad you are.

It doesn't tumble anywhere.
It doesn't even tip.
It doesn't move at all.

If you're not smart enough to think that through,
you kick the stone,
leave a muddy-smudge shoeprint,
and limp away with a bruised foot that hurts so bad
you're even angrier than you were
when you kicked the headstone in the first place.
So angry you need to kick something else
even though your toe is probably broken
and the rest of you is, for sure.

How Was I Supposed to Know

Edna Grace Thomas,
Loving Wife of Henry,
Mother to Kelly, Patrick, and Scott
also happened to be
Queen of the High Peaks
and
Beloved Trail Mother to Thousands
She Encouraged to Adventure Outdoors.

Seriously.

If a person was really
all that,
wouldn't you make sure
the part of their flimsy grave that said so
wasn't all covered in moss?

I Made a New Headline for that Newspaper Article

Angry Kid Knocks Over Gravestone of
Dead-Lady-Who-Was-Awesome.

Kid is Opposite-of-Awesome.

Everyone is disappointed in him.

Again.

They're also disappointed because of this.

Friday, May 27, 2022

LAKE PLACID MIDDLE SCHOOL NOTICE OF INCOMPLETE WORK

Dear parent/caregiver:

Please be advised that **Finn Connelly** is in danger of failing **ELA 7 and PHYS ED**. If missing work is not completed by August 31, the student will receive a failing grade for the course and may be held back.

Physical Education

Teacher: H. James

Missed PE classes: 14

Students missing PE hours are required to make up time (one hour of moderate-to-strenuous activity per class missed). A parent or guardian must sign to verify hours.

English Language Arts 7

Teacher: L. Garcia

7th Grade Poetry Project:

What Makes a Hero?

Assignment: Draft, revise, and edit a collection of at least twenty poems about people you consider to be heroes. You may write about anyone who inspires you, living or dead. Your collection should begin with an introduction poem and must include at least five different poetic forms (haiku, sonnet, acrostic, concrete poem, found poem, riddle poem, erasure poem, free verse, magic 9, ode, pantoum, sestina, villanelle). Be sure to make use of poetic devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, similes, and metaphors. Have fun!

Why I Skipped Those Gym Classes

Have you ever tried to do cardio
with a busted heart?
Seriously.
Mine is busy
trying to get through the day,
half-crushed under memories
that come pounding in out of nowhere.
That's no kind of shape
to be running the mile.

Introductory Poem for the Stupid Poetry Project

You know why I haven't done this project?
There's no such thing as a hero.
Go ahead. Fight me on this.
Name your hero—any hero—
and give me an hour online.
I'll do a deep-dive search
that pulls up everything
you didn't want to know.
Who they cheated
and cheated on,
how the strong ones cried
and the honest ones lied and half of history
was tied up in stuff that got
erased from our books
as if it never happened at all.

I told you all this last week, Ms. G.
Remember?
You nodded and got real quiet.
Hmm.
And then you said,
Maybe you'd like to write about your dad.
You waited for me to answer but I didn't
because it wasn't a question.
It was just you spouting off and
what makes you think you know
what I maybe want and maybe don't?

I've had plenty of mean teachers,
the kind who just want you to shut up
while they drink coffee and wait to retire,

and I can deal with that just fine.
It's the nice ones you have to watch out for.
The ones who keep granola bars
in just-in-case-you're-hungry baskets by the door.
The ones who look at you with kind eyes
because they saw some sappy teacher movie:
Make a Difference in a Young Person's Life!
I see you, Ms. G.
Standing there like you care, all
Maybe you'd like to write about your dad.
Yeah.
Maybe not.

Photograph

(Free verse poem for the Stupid Poetry Project)

I get it, Ms. G.
You saw that newspaper clipping
on the bulletin board
when you went to get a library card
your first week in town.
It's more than twenty years old,
all yellowed and brittle,
but they never took it down.
It's not every day a kid from here
gets splashed across the front page
of the *New York Freaking Times*.

I see that photo in my sleep.
Every detail.
Dad's black coat white with ash.
His hair.
His face.
Like a statue carved in cold gray stone,
lines chiseled in his forehead,
around his eyes.
Muddy tear streak down his cheek
as he ran from the North Tower.
He had a survivor!
He was carrying her
in those strong statue arms.
Her leg was bleeding and she wore
one red shoe,
the other lost somewhere
in the ashes, smoke, and screams.

That photo won awards.
It was all people talked about.
His face.
Her shoe.
It's all I see now
when I try to remember Dad,
and maybe that's the trouble with photos.
They only capture one frozen moment
that grows and grows
until the story of that split second
when the shutter clicked
crowds out the hours and years
that happened before and after
and a person becomes nothing
but what the camera captured in that instant.
Hero. Vandal. Whatever.

Pointless

(Free verse poem for the Stupid Poetry Project)

The last weeks of school are as pointless
as end-of-June pencils,
blunt little stubs that can't even remember
how sharp they were in September.

Face facts, Ms. G.
Even you and Mr. Link have packed up the textbooks
and cued up some old Disney movie
you pretend ties in with curriculum.

At this point we're either going to pass the final
or not.
Finish the project
or not.
Pass the year with flying colors.
Or not.
Some of us made that choice a long time ago
and the choice was . . .
Not.

HERO

(according to *Merriam-Webster's* online dictionary)

1. a: a mythological or legendary figure often of divine descent endowed with great strength or ability
 - b:** an illustrious warrior
 - c:** a person admired for achievements and noble qualities
 - d:** one who shows great courage
2. **a:** the principal character in a literary or dramatic work
 - b:** the central figure in an event, period, or movement

Endowed

When you are ENDOWED with something,
it's given to you.

Served on a silver platter.

You don't have to go searching.

You don't have to inflate yourself

like some sumo wrestler Halloween costume
that comes with a pump and makes even walking
awkward, plastic skin outside your skin,
whole lot of nothing filling the space between
so you're bouncing off walls, wondering
if the real you is even still in there at all.

ENDOWED also means BEQUEATHED.

Handed down in a last will and testament.

Dad didn't have one of those,

I guess because there wasn't much to leave.

Mom has some of his stuff in a closet.

I got a box with Dad's baseball hat,

high school yearbook, and firefighter badge.

His great strength and ability weren't in there.

I don't know where those were endowed,

but it wasn't to me.

Seven More Haiku for the Stupid Poetry Project

When Dad was in school
his name was in the paper
for playing hockey.

SPECTACULAR SAVE!
CONNELLY SETS LEAGUE RECORD!
GOALIE MVP!

They don't write headlines
about boys who like to bake.
Those are less catchy.

CONNELLY MEASURES
BUTTER, SUGAR, FLOUR, SALT,
MAKES TASTY COOKIES.

You see what I mean?
So my name never made news.
At least until now.

P.S.

I didn't forget
the elements of haiku.
Here's the nature stuff.

When you eat cookies
outside by a sparkling lake,
sparrows sneak the crumbs.

The Verdict

On the morning we're supposed to go to court
and find out what happens to kids
who knock over the wrong headstone,
we don't.

Instead, Mom leads me to a downtown office
where two women I don't know are waiting.
One in a lawyer-looking suit.
The other in a bright blue dress,
some flowery tree tattooed up her ankle,
orange scarf slung around her shoulders.

The suit stands up.
She's the prosecutor in charge of my case.
There might not be a court appearance after all, she says,
and I'm so relieved I miss what comes next
but I snap to attention when she rattles off
the price of the headstone I busted:
\$2,600 for a weathered hunk of rock.

I don't have to look at Mom
to know we can't pay that.
I'm about to stand up and say fine,
send me off to juvie or whatever,
when the suit says something about
another way to make reparations.

Reparations

*the act of making amends, offering expiation,
or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury*

Reparations are when you pay back
what you took. Make amends
for harm you caused.

We talked about it in Mr. Link's class—
how the United States paid reparations
to Japanese Americans whose relatives
were unjustly imprisoned during World War II.

I'm trying to figure out
what any of this has to do with a busted headstone
when the suit sits down
and the scarf stands up.

What the Scarf Said

My name is Kelly Thomas.

My mother loved the mountains.

It takes me a minute to put those two things together.
Then I remember the name
engraved on the headstone under the moss:
Edna Grace Thomas,
my muddy footprint smeared over the T
on granite we can't afford to replace.

I'm sorry, I tell her,
and hope for a second
that might be reparations enough.
But Kelly has something else in mind.

My mother had a goal before she died.
She wanted to climb all 46 High Peaks again,
this time with her dog.
But she only managed a few
before she passed away.

I'm sorry.
Still seems like what I'm supposed to say
since I still have no clue
what this has to do with reparations
or with me.

My mother loved the mountains,
Kelly says again.
She believed they had the power to heal.

*To help a troubled soul feel peace.
Make a broken person whole.*

When she says those words—
Troubled.
Broken.
She looks at me.

*I don't think my mom would want you punished.
She wouldn't want some fancy new headstone.
She'd want to take you hiking.*
Kelly smiles, and just as I'm wondering
how much weirder this is going to get,
she cuts to the chase.

*I know you've had some struggles.
Here's what I'm willing to do.*

She'll Drop All the Charges

I don't have to go to court.
I won't get sent to juvie.
Don't even have to pay for a new headstone.
There's just one thing she wants me to do:
climb mountains.
Stand on every Adirondack summit
over four thousand feet,
and hike them *all* this summer.

Twelve weeks.
46 peaks.
Finish by Labor Day
and all the charges
go away.

Her plan's bizarre, and I wait for Mom to say so.
When she doesn't, I explain there's no way
Mom can take that much time off. No way
she can leave Gram alone in the chocolate shop
46 days in the busy tourist season
just so I can climb mountains.

*How about if I do yard work or bake you some cookies
for reparations instead?*

Traitor

That's when Mom jumps in and says no,
it's all good.

She and Kelly have been talking (!!!).

They have it all worked out.

Mom doesn't have to hike with me.

Instead I'll tackle the mountains
with people like Edna Grace Thomas,
who have stood on every summit.

They're called 46ers.

Kelly's already started a sign-up sheet for volunteers
like when Dad died
and we got a calendar full of casseroles.

Now the charity work is hiking with me.

Are You Freaking Kidding Me?

The words explode from my mouth.

I jump up.

My foot throbs and I want to kick
something over all over again.

I have more to say

but when I turn to Mom to say it,

she's sitting there looking not surprised at all.

Not surprised I just blew up in a lawyer's office.

Not surprised I'm screaming in front of strangers.

Not surprised we're here in the first place.

When somebody you love does something terrible,
you're supposed to be shocked.

You're supposed to say

This is so unlike him!

But no one's looking at me that way.

They're just sitting calmly

like I'm the wind blowing everything around

because that's what wind is supposed to do.

It makes me stop, mid-gust.

Mom's Voice Is Tired When She Finally Talks

*Kelly has made a generous offer, she says.
Maybe it will do you some good.*

I'm desperate for this meeting to end,
so I say sure.
I'll do it. Why not.

46 mountains, I tell myself.
I ran track this spring—
tried for a while, anyway,
until my grades got me benched.
How hard could it be?

*I'm so glad, Kelly says. I look away
while she goes on about what this would mean
to her mother
(Queen of the High Peaks and blah-blah-blah).
I tune back in when she says
There's just one more thing.*

You have to take the dog.

Rules for Reparations

When you're having a bad day
and you kick over a dead lady's headstone
and get caught and can't afford a new one,
you don't have much power to negotiate.
So when Kelly says I have to take
her dead mother's dog along on my hikes,
what am I supposed to do?

I'm not much of a dog guy.
We never had one because city apartments
are small and besides dogs poop all over
and who wants to deal with that?
But if it gets me out of trouble, then
whatever.

Fine. I'll take the dog.

That's how I end up at Kelly's front door
getting jumped on
and pawed at
and licked
by the most slobbery,
drooly-faced,
smelly-furred,
farty-butt dog
in the world.

His Name is Seymour

He follows us inside,
tripping over my sneakers
and sniffing my crotch
while Kelly goes on about
what a good hiking dog he is.
She hands me a leash,
which is required in the High Peaks
and important to keep him safe
so he doesn't go chasing other dogs
or wildlife or whatever.

The leash is long and stretchy
so he can climb the steep parts, Kelly says,
without throwing me off balance.
That makes me snort-laugh
because seriously
would I be here right now
if I weren't already thrown?

Kelly pulls an orange backpack
from the closet—
You'll need this—
and crowds her kitchen table
with all the Things I Need to Bring
on My Forty-Six Hikes with Seymour.
She stuffs the bag with the Ten Essentials,
all these maps and headlamps,
first-aid-kit-compass-whistle crap.
Then adds dog treats and poop bags, and
Seymour keeps licking my hand,
stepping on my foot

while Mom laughs with Kelly and the backpack
gets fatter and fatter with compasses and
bags of trail mix and Band-Aids and
a dog bowl that collapses for easy packing.

See how this feels, Kelly says.

Then straps push down on my shoulders—
the weight of all that gear.

All that's happened these last two years.

All the things I wish I'd said
and wish I hadn't done.

The Last Time Somebody Stuffed a Bag So Full

It was supposed to be a quick trip upstate.

Just for a couple of weeks.

We crammed clothes in garbage bags,

school books in my backpack

because you can take remote classes from anywhere

and it would be safer in the mountains with Gram.

Mom would help her with online orders and

we'd be back in the Bronx in a couple of weeks.

As soon as all this blows over.

All this was a virus that raced around the world—

New York City the scary-sad center of everything

all over again.

All this was Dad gone extra hours, wailing

through Woodlawn Heights in his ambulance,

picking up people who couldn't breathe

and waited too long to get help.

All this was sirens that woke me in the night,

refrigerated trucks outside the hospital

I passed on my walk to Darius's house.

I tried not to think about what was inside.

All this was Darius's mom getting so sick

he had to stay with his aunt in Staten Island,

and the only way we could hang

was playing video games together,

avatar buddies three boroughs apart.

Pretty soon *all this* was Dad
not coming home at all. Not even to sleep.

All this was louder than sirens
and thicker than smoke
the morning I came out of my room,
found Mom stuffing Hefty bags
with clothes and homemade masks.
Dad was home, too—first time in two weeks.

He stayed outside on the stoop,
work clothes covered in who-knows-what,
eyes tired and wild,
ambulance double-parked on the street,
just for a minute to say goodbye and
Love you, buddy.

I don't think I said it back.
I was too tired and confused
watching Mom stuffing garbage bags with essentials
as if Dad wasn't one of them.

Dead Old Lady Boots

Here . . .

A tap on the shoulder brings me back from the Bronx.

You'll need these.

Kelly drags dusty boots from a closet.

I don't want your boots, I tell her.

They're not mine, she says.

They were my mother's.

She only wore them once.

Look, she says.

They're just your size.

Your mom checked for me.

(Traitor!)

. . . and in perfect shape.

Here.

She keeps pushing the boots at me

and I swear I smell

dead old lady feet.

I shove past her, stumble

over Seymour on my way out the door,

run all the way home,

heavy pack thumping

my back, up the porch,

through the kitchen,

upstairs to my room.

I dump the bag and fifteen pounds of
compass-map-headlamp-first-aid-trail-mix spills
out. I fling the ratty backpack to the closet,
kick everything else under my bed,
and angry myself to sleep.

At some point Mom comes in.
I pretend she isn't there. Don't open my eyes
until morning, and when I do, the dead old lady boots
are in my closet
as if they've been watching me all night.

Note to Ms. G

June 2, 2022

I wrote those poems you wanted, including some free verse and a bunch of haiku. Here are two more. I'm finished now, right?

~Finn

P.S.

Please tell Mr. James
I walked around the block twice
to make up gym class.

The sun was shining.
Nature nature blah blah blah.
This haiku is done.

June 3, 2022

Finn,

It's great that you've gotten a start on this project, but for now, your work remains incomplete. Please note:

- 1. This is a collection about heroes. You need twenty poems that fit that theme.*
- 2. There's more to haiku than counting syllables.*
- 3. At least five different poetic forms are required. You might try a found poem, where you collect words and phrases from another source and curate them into a poem. Remember when we wrote that poem in class using words from the front page of the newspaper? Sometimes poetry feels easier when you can borrow some words to get started. You might also try a poem in the style of one we studied this year, as a nod to that poet, or as a parody.*

You're a good writer, Finn. I'm confident you'll be able to complete this project over the summer.

Ms. G

P.S. I'm sorry if my suggestion upset you. You certainly don't have to write about your dad. But maybe it would help?

P.P.S. Pretty sure you know this already, but you need more hours for PE.

There's a Space for My Name

At the top of the form that says I want to be a 46er
(which is a lie, but that's not the point of this poem).

So let's talk about my name:

Finn is short for Finley. It's Irish
and means "fair-haired hero."

Would have been a better name for Dad,
who was actually a Hero.

Just ask the newspapers Gram keeps in her closet,
piles of front pages dated September 12, 2001.

Dad, carrying the woman with one red shoe.

Smoke billowing over the headline:

FIREFIGHTER HERO.

It happened years before I was born,
but somehow the photos seeped
into my mind, mixed with my memories
like I lived through it, too.

Mom still falls quiet in September.

Says she's remembering all those who died,
but Gram says it's because she understands now,
even though Dad wasn't one of them,
that's the day she lost him, too.

Dad's name was Noah,
which has two meanings.

One is rest, which he never did.

At least not when I knew him.

Dad had a motor churning inside him.

It never turned off. Even when he slept
his legs moved as if he were running
into buildings in his dreams.

Noah also means peace.

Remember when you talked about aptronyms, Ms. G?
You said it's when a person's name matches
who they are or what they do, like Lumiere,
the candlestick from *Beauty in the Beast*
whose name means light, or Mrs. Potts,
the teapot, and her little kid named Chip.

Sometimes people call a boy who's like his father
a chip off the old block,
but I don't even feel like the same kind of stone.
We're the opposite of aptronyms,
Dad and me.

What do you call it when a skinny kid who
likes to bake cookies gets stuck
with a name that means hero?

What do you call it when a hero
whose name means peace
dies before he can find it?

Mountains to Climb

The back of the form lists the mountains
I have to summit
to climb myself out of trouble.

Marcy's the tallest—
over five thousand feet—
and the mountains get shorter from there.
I skim the list to the final four,
which—what the heck?—
don't even hit the 4,000-foot mark.

I look it up, hoping I can skip those four
but no such stupid luck. The internet says
people weren't great at measuring
when the list was developed,
but the list is still the list.
The 46 are the 46, which means
unless I talk Mom out of this, I'm stuck
climbing these fake 46ers, too.

George Cheney and the Very Bad Hikes

If anyone can convince Mom
this is a bad idea,
it's George Cheney.

Good old George was a mountain guide.
who left behind a spectacular
record of what can go wrong
when people wander these woods.

He's in this Adirondack disasters book
I got from the library and left on the table,
hoping Mom would pick it up with her coffee
and realize she doesn't want her only son
to get stranded in a blizzard or mauled by a bear
or caught in an avalanche or fall
off
a
cliff.

But Mom's busy helping Gram with the shop.
They huddle over columns of numbers,
all worried whispers, shrugs, and shaking heads.
So I skim the book myself
and sneak in stories over dinner.

Super excited for these hikes, I tell Mom.

Really? I'm so glad!

Yeah, just hope I don't end up like George Cheney.

George Clooney?

Mom's eyes light up.

I love him!

*George **Cheney***, I correct her.

He was hiking the Adirondacks, like me.

And this one time, he . . .

(This is where it turns into a choose-your-own-disaster story.)

CHOOSE YOUR OWN DISASTER

You're an 1800s wilderness dude, and your name is George Cheney. One day, you're out hunting and the deer you're tailing swims away, so you chase it in your canoe. But your pistol slips off the seat and goes off and you end up with a bullet in your leg. Do you:

- A) Paddle your sorry butt back to shore and shout for help, or**
- B) Keep going after the deer?**

If you're George Cheney, you choose B. You catch up with the deer, shoot it (apparently you still have bullets to spare, even after shooting yourself in the leg), dress the carcass, hang it up, and check out your leg. It's not looking too great. Do you:

- A) Find some branches, carve them into crutches, and walk the fourteen miles back home, or**
- B) Realize that's a terrible idea given your injury, bandage it up, and stay put, waiting for help to arrive.**

If you're George Cheney, you choose A. And you make it home alive! But you're stuck in bed for six months while that leg heals. Once it does, do you:

- A) Get a new job where you're less likely to shoot off your leg, or**
- B) Head right back out to the mountains!**

If you're George Cheney, you totally choose B. Another time you're out in the mountains, you're hiking along and you see

a panther crouched in a tree, looking ready to pounce and eat you for dinner. How do you want to handle this one?

A) Run away! Run away!

B) Flop down and play dead.

C) Raise your arms to make yourself look bigger.

Back away very slowly, maintaining eye contact.

D) Shoot it.

You should definitely not choose A or B. If you run, you'll get chased, and if you don't remain standing, the mountain lion will see you as prey. The National Park Service says you should choose C. But if you're George Cheney, you choose D. And good news—you manage to hit the panther instead of yourself this time.

Later in the day, the temperature plunges, and you don't have enough clothes to stay warm. You're a long way from home and it's getting dark. Do you:

**A) Walk through the night so you
don't freeze to death.**

**B) Hunker down in a pile of leaves
and hope for the best.**

If you're George Cheney, you choose none of the above. Instead, you shoot a moose that happens to be wandering by, gut it, and spend the night, snug as a bug, inside the dead moose.

One more. You're still George Cheney, and this time, you're out hiking in snowshoes when you hit an unstable crust of snow and your leg busts through into an empty cavity the snow formed around a fallen tree. Do you:

- A) Stick around for a while and take a little nap, or**
- B) Climb out of the cavity and go on your merry way.**

Trick question! You can't do either of those things because **THERE'S A BEAR HIBERNATING IN THE CAVITY!** He *was*, anyway, until you showed up. Now the bear bursts out of the snow, snarling and growling all over the place. Do you:

- A) Run, or**
- B) Whip out your hunting knife to defend yourself.**

If you're George Cheney, you try to choose B, but forget that you loaned your hunting knife to a friend. But at least you still have your trusty pistol! And bonus—you've remembered to reload it since you shot your leg and that panther and probably a bunch of other stuff. Do you:

- A) Shoot the bear, or**
- B) Use the pistol to smack the bear in the head.**

If you're George Cheney, you choose A. But psych! The gun doesn't work, so you have to go with plan B. Only when you swing at the bear's head, it swats the pistol out of your hand with its massive paw and the two of you end up rolling around in the snow together. Fortunately, your dog Buck (did I mention you have a dog named Buck?) comes to your rescue. Buck bites the bear in the butt, and then the two of you are able to get away.

What about the Bears?

That's quite a story, Mom says.

I know, right?

She keeps chewing her pizza.

Think we should call this whole thing off?

Let's see . . . , she says,

I have a glimmer of hope
before she swats it away like a bear.

*You won't be hiking with a pistol.
There are no more panthers in these mountains.
And black bears don't attack people
unless they're provoked.
So just don't go bothering bears.*

*Yeah but what if I break through the snow
and end up busting into its den?*

Finn.
She looks at me over her slice.

*It's June.
The snow has melted.
And you have mountains to climb.
I'll drop you off at the trailhead at eight.*

Going Big

Go big or go home.
That's what Dad always said,
so I'm starting with the tallest high peak
(which you'd think would be named COLOSSUS
or MOUNT MEGAROCK or something instead of Marcy).

I don't wear the dead old lady boots.
I don't bring the orange backpack.
I'll do this my way or no way at all.
Go big.
Or go home.