



RIGHT BACK AT YOU

BY CAROLYN MACKLER

The Story

Mason lives in 2023. His parents have just split up, and there's a guy at school who won't get off his case. As part of an assignment, he writes a letter to Albert Einstein and it ends up getting a little too personal. He throws the letter into his closet . . . and the next day he gets a letter back from a girl named Talia, who lives in 1987. She has problems of her own, including classmates who make jokes because she's Jewish. She thought her friends would have her back. But it ends up the only person she really has to talk to is . . . a random boy from the future?

In the tradition of such beloved novels as *When You Reach Me* and *Save Me a Seat*, Carolyn Mackler has written a funny, all-too-relatable story about finding the friend you need . . . even if that friend happens to live in another year.

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Reading Group Questions

1. What are some of the big differences between the way Talia lives in 1987 and the way Mason lives in 2023? What are some of the things that haven't changed?
2. How do Mason and Talia learn to face up to their bullies? What are some of the things their bullies have in common?
3. What are some of the things that Mason and Talia say to each other that help them solve their problems?
4. If you were to have a pen pal from the past, who would you want it to be, and why?

About the Author



Photo © Nicholas Lindsay

Carolyn Mackler is the author of many acclaimed novels for kids and teens. Her books for kids include *Best Friend Next Door* and *Not If I Can Help It*. She lives in New York City with her family.

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Author Q&A

What was it like for you to look back to your own childhood time (the 1980s) with a 2020s lens . . . and then look at where we are now through the lens of the 1980s?

Obviously a lot has changed from the 1980s to the 2020s. Technology stood out as the biggest transformation and, with it, texting and Amazon and remote school. It was fascinating for me, through Mason, to explain Google to Talia. This place where you can look up anything or anyone or any Yankees game that's ever been played. And then for Talia to ask Mason things like why people in the 2020s carry water bottles all the time. *Are you all thirstier now?* This allowed me to reflect on my 1980s childhood. *We looked things up in the dictionary! We went to the library to find an obscure recipe! We waited until the newspaper arrived to find out sports scores!*

I suppose life in the 1980s seemed a little more low-key. And then to think about the 2020s through the lens of the 1980s? *People have so much information now! They are in touch all the time!* It's a lot more intense, a lot more stressful. And, yes, people do seem oddly thirstier.

That said, with thirty-six years between Talia and Mason, they were dealing with many of the same issues. That's what powered their friendship. They are both struggling with bullying. They both feel so alone. And they both realize that—even if there are no easy answers to bullying—friendship, even an unlikely friendship, can get you through the hardest times.

Can you talk a little about the problems that Talia is facing, and how they were drawn from some of your own experiences?

Talia lives in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1987. She is half-Jewish but not religious. Talia barely thinks about that part of her identity until boys in her seventh-grade class taunt her about being Jewish, throw pennies at her, and draw swastikas on their notebooks. It horrifies Talia—and she's appalled at her classmates for not taking a stance against the hatred. Sadly, Talia's story is directly based on my experience. I grew up half-Jewish in a small town in Western New York. In seventh grade, a group of boys began hurling antisemitic taunts at me, singing Hebrew-sounding songs, even dressing as Nazis on Halloween. Possibly worst of all, none of the other students and no teachers stopped them. Like Talia, I came from a nonreligious household. But unlike Talia, I was shy and insecure and didn't have the courage to stand up to those boys. I endured the bullying, cried when I got home, and stuffed all those awful feelings about myself deep down inside. It took years to get over how much those boys destroyed my self-esteem.

With dual-point-of-view narration, the reader always assumes the author is more like one character than the other . . . when usually there are pieces of the author in both. So I have to ask . . . what do you feel you have in common with Mason in this story?

As someone who was bullied in seventh grade, I immediately identified with Mason. I understood how it shredded Mason's self-worth when kids laughed at him and punched him and called him a loser. Also, I'm a sensitive person, much like Mason, and I love to spend time alone reading books. Like Mason, I'm also delighted when I find a friend who understands me. That makes all the difference.

A question I'm sure you'll get a lot—if you could write a single line of advice to Carolyn-in-the-1980s, what would it be?

Seek out true friends and try not to care about the rest.