



# Sea Legs

By Jules Bakes & Niki Smith

## ***Sea Legs: A Graphic Novel***

By Jules Bakes and Niki Smith

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Ages 8–12 • Grades 3–7

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## The Story

Janey's family is about to set sail for the adventure of a lifetime! The only problem? Janey must leave her school, her life, her best friend, the entire *country* behind for new adventures—coral reefs, colorful markets, and new cultures. Life at sea is exhilarating, but there's a major downside: when you're raising anchor every few days with sights on a new harbor, it's almost impossible to make new friends. Finally, Janey meets the cool and aloof Astrid—a fellow boat kid who's equally starved for friendship. But Astrid can be a challenging friend to navigate, and beyond that, hurricane season has only just begun . . .

At turns laugh-out-loud hilarious and heartbreakingly poignant, this stunning middle grade graphic memoir charts both the turbulence and joys of growing up.

## Reading Group Questions

1. What is it like for Janey to leave life on land behind? What is she excited about, and what is she afraid of?
2. What do Janey and Astrid have in common? How are they different? What do you think makes their friendship difficult? What might make their friendship strong?
3. Now that you've finished the book, what are some of the things you remember the most about it? Are there certain scenes or images that really worked to help you understand the story?
4. Why does Astrid say Janey thinks she's the center of the universe? Was she right or wrong?
5. If you were in Janey's shoes, would you have told Astrid's secret? Why or why not?

## About the Creators



Photo © Elektra Day Walker

**Jules Bakes** spent her childhood sailing around the Caribbean and South America, but these days she works at Yale University. She lives in Hamden, Connecticut, with her husband, two weirdo little dogs, and the ghosts of many fish. This is her first novel.



Photo © Niki Smith

**Niki Smith** is the author and artist of the Lambda Literary Award-nominated graphic novel *The Deep & Dark Blue*. Her book *The Golden Hour* was a *Kirkus*, *SLJ*, and New York Public Library Best Book of 2021. When she's not drawing comics, she's collecting embroidery hoops and zines and learning to draw boats. Niki now lives in Munich, Germany, with her wife and two bilingual cats.

## Creators Q&A

**What gave you two the idea to create *Sea Legs*? What was it like to collaborate together?**

**Niki:** Jules and I met online when we were twelve! We met when Jules was still living aboard the *Merimaid*, and we loved to draw and tell stories together. Once I went to college, one of the very first comics I made was an adaptation of one of her short stories. A few years ago, I went on a trip and stayed on a houseboat—and I thought it would be the perfect setting for a book. But I knew that I wouldn't be able to dream up a better story than the actual adventures Jules lived through as a kid, sailing around the Caribbean with her family. I gave her a poke, and she agreed to give it a try . . . and *Sea Legs* is the result. It's been the most fun collaboration I've ever had making graphic novels, and I love that we've come full circle in telling stories together!

**Jules:** Niki came to me in the very early stages of a concept she was trying to flesh out. She and her wife had stayed on a houseboat during a recent vacation and the experience had put some stars in her eyes—she'd realized she'd love to use life on a boat as a base to set her next story. We'd been friends since we were kids in middle school and had spent some super formative years writing stories together, along with a number of other friends our age, on a small internet forum. She knew I'd lived on a boat when we'd first met and had approached me at first basically in a consulting capacity—she wanted to know more about my experience and what life had been like. But the more I told her, the more stories came to mind. Finally she just said, “Do you think it's possible you'd want to write this?” The answer, resoundingly, was yes. As far as actual collaboration is concerned, I can't stress enough how understanding, helpful, and kind Niki has been through this entire process—she's a consummate and seasoned professional, and shepherding this anxious newbie through the wild gauntlet that is a first-time publishing experience couldn't have been easy, but I couldn't have asked for a better guide. I'm a very lucky person!

**Much of *Sea Legs* is based on Jules's real life. Jules, how did it feel to revisit these memories? Did the process of creating the book make you see any of these events differently?**

**Jules:** Something I didn't anticipate when I first took on this project is how uniquely challenging, in some ways, it can be to cut your creative teeth on a story inspired by real life. For starters, I didn't realize how oddly beholden I would feel to the truth, how strangely difficult it could feel, at least for me, to not only take full advantage of the “fiction” aspect of “fictionalized memoir” and depart from the strict retelling of experiences as they actually happened, but also to find a compelling narrative within the parameters of that real-life experience—to filter the noise out of chaotic, sometimes nonsensical reality and find a story that had a trajectory, made sense, and felt like it mattered. Janey has some difficult experiences in this book that are direct reflections of things that happened in real life, and like Janey, I wasn't always sure how to handle or interpret them at the time. Revisiting these as an adult, and knowing a little bit more about what I may have been seeing or hearing—or not seeing and hearing—was not always easy, but it reminded me that we are always learning, and someday I will likely have different ideas about experiences I am having today, too.

## Creators Q&A (continued)

**As a graphic novel, visual storytelling is at the heart of *Sea Legs*. Niki, what aspects of the story were you most excited to bring to life visually? Are there any images or spreads you're particularly proud of, and if so, why?**

**Niki:** My favorite metaphor in *Sea Legs* is the flying fish—just a tiny, unassuming fish, but when it needs to, it can do *amazing things*. And getting to come up with the visuals to pair with that was SO much fun. From the goofy secret hand sign Janey comes up with for her International Flying Fish Society, to the final pages of the fish gliding across the surface of the water at sunset . . . it was a joy to draw.

**What would you love for a reader to understand more after reading *Sea Legs*?**

**Jules:** One thing I hope readers can take away from *Sea Legs* is something it took me a very long time to really understand—that people can hurt your feelings even if they haven't really done anything wrong. I would also like readers to consider that we never really know what people are going through, and a word or action from others that seems to make no sense to us in the moment might be the result of a lot of unseen realities.

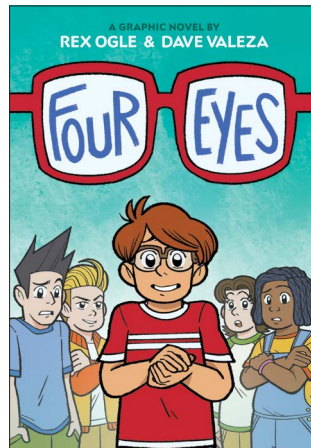
**Niki:** We all have our own struggles in life, but we also have privileges that we might not know we have. Janey learns a lot about her small place in a big ocean, and realizes she shouldn't take so much for granted. Pausing to look more closely at what someone else is going through is a big part of growing up, and the world needs more empathy and understanding.

## If You Liked *Sea Legs*, Read These Next!



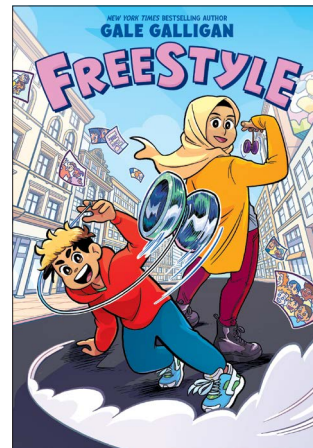
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