

PRAISE FOR
the *Magical Imperfect*

“*The Magical Imperfect* is brimming with beautiful language, bursting with heart, and chock-full of important truths. Chris Baron writes exactly the kind of books I needed as a kid.”

—**JARRETT LERNER**, author of the *EngiNerds* series and the *Geeger the Robot* series

“This tender, graceful book will deeply touch readers. It’s simply lovely.”

—**MAE RESPICIO**, award-winning author of *The House That Lou Built*

“I savored every word of this beautiful and moving story of family, friendship, and being comfortable in your own skin. Highly recommended!”

—**ADRIANNA CUEVAS**, author of *The Total Eclipse of Nestor Lopez*

“What a beautiful, magical book . . . I loved the family, the community, the kindness, the traditions, the hope, the magic, and how the characters face their fears by supporting one another.”

—**JENNI L. WALSH**, author of the *She Dared* series, *Hettie and the London Blitz*, and *I Am Defiance*

“A dreamy story that highlights friendship, family, and love . . . Etan and Malia are selfless characters who give so much of themselves easily. I wish we all could learn from them!”

—**REEM FARUQI**, author of *Unsettled* and *Amira’s Picture Day*

“This novel in verse tells a heartfelt story of friendship, family, and community . . . Readers are going to love this one!”

—**GILLIAN McDUNN**, author of *Caterpillar Summer* and *The Queen Bee and Me*

“Wise, gentle, and full of energy and fun, this is a story about community, friendship, traditions, immigration, mental health, chronic medical conditions, golems, earthquakes, baseball, finding your voice . . . and Cyndi Lauper. Magically perfect.”

—**JESS REDMAN**, author of *The Miraculous*, *Quintessence*, and *The Adventure Is Now*

Jacket art © 2021 by André Ceolin
Jacket design by Trisha Previte

PJ OUR
WAY®

www.pjourway.org

 **SQUARE FISH**
NEW YORK ■ MACKIDS.COM

ETAN HAS STOPPED speaking since his mother left. His father and grandfather don't know how to help him. His friends have given up on him.

When Etan delivers a grocery order to the outskirts of town, he realizes he's at the home of Malia Agbayani, also known as the creature. Malia stopped going to school when her acute eczema spread to her face, and the bullying became too much.

Soon, other kids tease Etan for being friends with the creature. But he believes he might have a cure for Malia's condition, if only he can convince his family and hers to believe it, too. Even if it works, will these two outcasts find where they fit in?

Here is a lyrical, uplifting story about the healing powers of friendship and empathy.

CHRIS BARON is a professor of English at San Diego City College. His first novel, *All of Me*, was a Southern California Independent Booksellers Association bestseller, a Book Riot Best Children's Book About Kindness, and an NCTE Notable Book. Newbery Medalist Matt de la Peña called it, "Beautifully written, brilliant, and necessary." Chris lives in San Diego with his family.

chris-baron.com



the
*Magical
Imperfect*

CHRIS BARON



Feiwel and Friends
New York



A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC

120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

mackids.com

Copyright © 2021 by Chris Baron. All rights reserved.

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

First edition, 2021

Book design by Trisha Previte

Printed in [country] by [printer name, city, state / region]

Feiwel and Friends logo designed by Filomena Tuosto

ISBN 978-1-250-76782-0 (hardcover)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Part
1

Earthquake Drill

The alarm
is a wave
that knocks us
out of our chairs.
Pencils fly,
papers float in the air,
chairs squeak
as we dive
under our desks.
But nobody is scared.
It's only a drill.

We are getting used to them.
There were a few small quakes
over the summer,
so school makes us
do drills once a week.
But I don't like how loud it gets,
the alarm's bell sound winding up
and down and up again.
We wait until
we're told
it's time to go outside.

When we get to the field,
Jordan and the other boys
argue about the World Series.
Jordan used to be my best friend
until our parents got in an argument
that broke everything into pieces,
so it's different now.
He spends his time with Martin.

Martin thinks the A's and the Giants
are going to be in it.

*A's in '89, he says. No one steals
bases like Rickey Henderson.*

If I wanted to speak up,

I would tell him no way.

Candy Maldonado is too good in the outfield.

Dad and I always root for the Giants!

Speak

When we come back
to class, we have
to finish our quiz
by reciting five helping verbs.
Except I don't have to;
I have a note that
says it's okay for me
to write things down.
I don't like to speak
in front of people.
Some teachers say I won't.
But it's not that.
I don't like to talk.

My father says
it's because my mom had to go.
The doctor he takes me to
agrees with him
and thinks it may be "selective mutism."
But I don't have anyone
I *want* to talk to right now.

I'd rather spend time on Main Street
with my grandfather in his jewelry shop,
where he fixes broken things
and makes them whole again.

Sometimes I watch my father build houses.
He can hammer a nail in with one swing.
Not me. I'm kind of small,
and a little round,
and I can draw a tree faster
than I can hammer a nail,
so I stick to that.

Mom

I wasn't quiet before.
I liked to talk,
especially after Little League games;
Mom would take us to get ice cream,
double scoops of Rocky Road.
When we lost, she let me get a triple scoop,
which always made me feel better.
It wasn't the ice cream, it was the way
I could talk to her about everything.
It's like the ice cream was
made of magic;
it let the words drift out of me.
Words about how hard
math homework is.
Words about the way
that sometimes
the boys on the playground
told Cole that he wasn't really a boy.
We talked about cartoons and toy soldiers.
I showed her my drawings,
and she asked so many questions.

She looked and listened
with her whole body.

I guess
I should have been listening
more to her.

I didn't know about
her problems inside.

When she left,
I felt like part of my voice
went with her.

It's been three months since we took
her past the Golden Gate Bridge,
up and down
the roller-coaster hills
to what she says is the city's heart,
to the hospital.

Big trees in the garden,
roses planted in a circle
around a fountain
where I threw in every penny I had.

She can talk to us on the phone,
but we can only visit her once a month.
It's part of her treatment.
She tells me that she's sick
on the inside.

She says that the roads
her thoughts take
are too windy for now,
and she needs help
straightening them out.
She told me the best thing I can do
is pray for her,
take care of my dad,
 spend time with my grandfather
 until she gets back.

When she reached down
to say goodbye one last time,
she said, *I love you, Eitan*,
just like when she used to tuck me in
after she finished a story.
But when I opened my mouth
to say it back,
no words
came out.

After School

After school I go down to Main Street.
It has the oldest shops in Ship's Haven
and even older people, who have seen all sorts of things.
Once, Mrs. Li told me that she remembers
when there were more wagons pulled by horses
than cars on the road.

Main Street is less than a mile
away from school,
and I can run pretty fast;
past the redwood park
where kids from school play baseball,
past our apartment
to where the river crosses the middle of town,
to the hill just above Main Street.
From there, when there isn't any fog,
you can even see San Francisco to the north
and the ocean far away.
My grandfather tells me how his boat sailed right past here
on its way to Angel Island,
when he first came to America, a long, long time ago.

Dog Ears

Before I reach Main Street,
I pass our small apartment building.
Mrs. Hershkowitz, my neighbor,
leans out of her third-story window.
ETAN! she calls, *can you bring me
some roast beef from the deli?*
I look up as I run past, and nod,
but she can't see me well enough.
I have to speak, so can she hear me.
I take a deep breath and say, *Okay.*
WHAT? she yells, so I give her thumbs-up.
THANK YOU, she yells, and goes inside,
and just then I see
the tufted white fur,
the bandit face of her dog,
standing at the window, tongue flying
in a wide doggy smile.

Main Street

Main Street feels like a festival.
The small shops have open doors
and wide windows.
Fish and long-tentacled creatures
hang from wires in one window,
colorful dragon-shaped kites fly in another.
Next door, fruits and vegetables fill silver bowls
along wooden tables,
apples and artichokes, tomatoes
and eggplants, cucumbers,
bins full of peanuts and dried mangoes,
a carnival of food and music.
A saxophone hums down the street
to the beating of a drum
and the strum of a guitar.

In the late afternoon,
it's even more crowded,
a sea of grown-ups, families,
kids from school
shopping or playing,
visiting grandparents,
and always always always
stopping at Dimitri's Candy Shop
for the crystal clear rock candy
he gives out for free
to any kid who asks.

The shop owners smile when they see me—
I've been coming to my grandfather's jewelry shop
ever since I can remember—
and I do my best to smile back,
but mostly I look toward the ground
because they might ask me a question,
and I don't really want to answer.

The Bakery

There is a bakery
in one of the oldest parts
of Main Street,
down a small alleyway,
where the road is brick
and letters curl into stone
with the initials of all the people
from the *Calypso*,
the ship that brought
so many families here
from over the sea.
My grandfather tells me
that for some,
it was the hardest thing
they ever did.
People had to leave their families,
or find a way to save them.
When they finally got here,
not everyone was welcome.
He tells me that people who go through
a voyage like that
will do anything
for each other.

When my grandpa first got here,
there were only small roads,
mostly just farmland,
and little by little they laid brick
for the streets
and opened more shops,
one at a time,
so they could remember
who they once were.

Not everyone sees the initials
or knows what they mean.
But I do:
different letters and characters,
even a painted flower,
like a stone garden
planted for them
to always remember
when their time here began.
I know I've arrived when I smell
fresh coffee cake,
strawberries simmering;
see cookie dough rolled out
on long, flour-sprinkled tables,
chocolate-raisin babka,
and coconut macaroons.
I stare through the front glass case.
Mr. Cohen puts his towel
over his shoulder, smiles,
and hands me a chocolate rugelach
on a napkin,
 and I sit.

I wait for him to pull the last bagels
from the boiling water.
I get one salt bagel
and one black coffee
for my grandfather,
and a soft maple cookie for me.

Grandfather

My grandfather is a giant man
with iron hands.

He works in his jewelry shop
from before the sun goes up
until long after it sets,
except on Friday,
when he leaves extra early
so he can be home
to light the Shabbat candles.

The candles, he says,
they make us Jews.