



[The Best at It](#) by Maulik Pancholy

Balzer + Bray, HarperCollins, 2019

ISBN: 9780062866424 (Paperback)

*Age Range: 8-12 (Suggested by Publisher)

Grade Range: 3-7 (Recommended by *School Library Journal*)

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Rahul Kapoor is heading into seventh grade in a small town in Indiana. The start of middle school is making him feel increasingly anxious, so his favorite person in the whole world, his grandfather, Bhai, gives him some well-meaning advice: *Find one thing you're really good at and become the BEST at it.*

Those four little words sear themselves into Rahul's brain. While he's not quite sure what that special thing is, he is convinced that once he finds it, bullies like Brent Mason will stop torturing him at school. And he won't be worried about staring too long at his classmate Justin Emery. With his best friend, Chelsea, by his side, Rahul is ready to crush this challenge.... But what if he discovers he isn't the best at anything?

Funny, charming, and incredibly touching, this is a story about friendship, family, and the courage it takes to live your truth.

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

★ "The protagonist's devastatingly honest voice pulls readers deeply into a fast-paced journey... heartbreakingly authentic."

— [Kirkus Reviews \(starred review\)](#)

★ "An impressive first novel...wholly engaging."

— ALA Booklist (**starred review**)

★ "This funny, uplifting story about identity... sends a powerful, positive message to young readers about choosing self-acceptance."

— [Publishers Weekly \(starred review\)](#)

"Rahul is a compelling protagonist... Hand this to middle grade readers who are navigating changing social dynamics as they come of age."

— [School Library Journal](#)

"An emotional, earnest, and genuine journey to self-love that had me crying, laughing, and cheering Rahul on from beginning to end. Hilarious and heartbreaking and truly touching—I wanted nothing more than to reach through the pages and give Rahul a big hug for being brave, determined, and the best that he can be."

— Kacen Callender, Stonewall Award-winning author of *Hurricane Child*

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“A funny, fun, big-hearted book filled with characters to adore. Rahul’s journey toward learning to stand up for himself and finding his place in the world is achingly emotionally authentic and deeply resonant. This novel is a joy from beginning to end.”

— Anne Ursu, award-winning author of *Breadcrumbs* and *The Lost Girl*

“Maulik Pancholy’s story of an Indian American boy trying to come to terms with all facets of his identity while proving his own worth is at once exuberant and heart-wrenching, brightened with assured, lived-in details and a hero we love from the very first page. Every middle schooler will find themselves in this book. A wonderful, heartfelt debut.”

— Soman Chainani, *New York Times* bestselling author of the School for Good and Evil series

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

- Stonewall Honor Book
- ALA Rainbow Book List
- Junior Library Guild Selection
- Scripp’s Spelling Bee’s Bookshelf Selection
- Bank Street Best Children’s Book of the Year
- Chicago Public Library Best of the Best
- Maryland Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award Finalist
- Maine Student Book Award Finalist
- Iowa Reads 2021 Short List
- Vermont Middle Grade Children’s Book Award Nominee
- Delaware Blue Hen Book Award Middle Readers Nominee
- Iowa Children’s Choice Award Nominee
- Illinois Rebecca Caudill Young Readers’ Book Award Master List
- New York Times Best Audiobooks for Road Trips with Kids
- Paste Magazine Best Audiobook of the Month
- North Carolina 2024-2025 Middle School Battle of the Books
- All Iowa Reads Short List
- All Connecticut Reads Short List
- Seattle Public Library Global Reading Challenge
- Neev Literature Festival 2022 Shortlist
- Oregon Battle of the Books Selection
- Evanston Public Library 101 Great Books for Kids

MEDIA AND RESOURCES

- [Educators’ Guide](#)
- Smithsonian 2023 National Education Summit Keynote
- [Act to Change interview](#)
- [SLJ Interview](#)
- [LGBTQ Reads interview](#)
- [Velshi Banned Book Club](#)

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RESPONSE TO CHALLENGES

Add responses to challenges whenever possible, including links if available. Relevant information includes official responses from a board of education, library statements of support, or other statements of support from relevant organizations like PEN America or the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund.

- [Pennsylvania school board reverses, reinvites Maulik Pancholy](#)
- [School Board Cancels Gay Actor's Anti-Bullying Talk Over His 'Lifestyle'](#)
- [Pennsylvania School Board Reinstates Gay Author's Speech Amid Backlash](#)
- [Pennsylvania school board reinstates gay author's anti-bullying speech after public outcry](#)
- ['30 Rock' actor Maulik Pancholy speaks out after school board cancels author visit](#)
- [Backlash after gay actor's middle school appearance cancelled over his 'lifestyle'](#)
- [Censored for his 'lifestyle' as a gay Indian man: Maulik Pancholy joins the Velshi Banned Book Club](#)

AUTHOR STATEMENT

[Response on April 18, 2024](#)

On Monday evening, I learned via social media that the school board of the Cumberland Valley School District in Pennsylvania voted 8-0 to cancel my scheduled author visit with the students of Mountain View Middle School due to concerns about my "activism" and what they called my "lifestyle."

My heart goes out to the entire Mountain View Middle School community, and particularly to the students.

Both of my books – *The Best At It* (Stonewall Honor Winner) and *Nikhil Out Loud* (Lambda Literary Award Winner) – are stories that reflect the full, complicated, and wonderful lives of middle school students.

As a middle schooler, I never saw myself represented in the stories around me. I couldn't find books that featured South Asian-American or LGBTQ+ characters. They didn't exist.

And when I set out to write my own novels so many years later, I was still hard-pressed to find those stories. It's why I wrote my books in the first place. Because representation matters.

When I visit schools, my "activism" is to let all young people know that they're seen. To let them know that they matter. When I talk about the characters in my books feeling "different," I'm always surprised by how many young people raise their hands – regardless of their identities and backgrounds – wanting to share about the ways in which they, too, feel different.

That's the power of books. They build empathy.

I wonder why a school board is so afraid of that?

It's been incredibly moving to see the outpouring of solidarity, love, and support from the community at Mountain View Middle School: to see the petitions that you've started; to hear from former and current students and faculty; and to see the courage on display, particularly from young people.

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I hope that every single student at MVMS is receiving that message of support and love. That you know that regardless of who you are, you belong.

To each of you: I see you. I appreciate you. You matter. No one can take that away from you.

With love,
Maulik

[Updated response on April 25, 2024](#)

Last night, the Cumberland Valley School District school board convened a special meeting to reconsider their unanimous decision to cancel my scheduled author visit at Mountain View Middle School.

The school board listened to the community, reversed course, and voted 5-4 to reinstate my visit.

I'm deeply grateful to the hundreds of people who showed up and for the outpouring of support from the Superintendent, administrators, parents, caregivers, teachers, and community members. I was especially moved by every single student who showed immense courage stepping up to the podiums. Thank you for sharing your powerful messages of love, inclusion, respect, and belonging.

It was an honor to listen to each of you.

I know what this would have meant to me growing up as an LGBTQ+ kid of color. Last night, you made sure every single student at MVMS knows they belong.

I recognize there is much healing and work that still needs to happen. My heart is with you as your community continues to come together. Please know that your actions have been an inspiration to myself and to so many who have been watching.

To every student at MVMS: I see you. I appreciate you. You matter.

I cannot wait to meet all of you in person.

With love,
Maulik

[Post-event notes on May 28, 2024](#)

On Wednesday, May 22nd, I visited Mountain View Middle School in the Cumberland Valley School District of Pennsylvania. It was wonderful meeting the Superintendent, the Principal, faculty members, and staff.

The best part was meeting the students.

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Just as I imagined, they were absolutely incredible. I presented at three assemblies – one each for the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. And I had lunch with an exceptional group of students. We talked about both of my books, *The Best at It* and *Nikhil Out Loud*, what it's like to feel different, and the power of being an ally.

My heart is filled with gratitude for every parent, caregiver, faculty member, administrator, community member, and particularly every student who stood up for themselves and for each other to make this visit happen. You've inspired me. You've inspired so many.

With love,
Maulik

***A NOTE ON AGE RANGES**

A publisher-suggested age range covers the gamut of readers that publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate age range for the diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book's intended use.