



THIS IS ALLEY.

His teachers say he has the heart of a lion and the test scores of a baked potato, which is fine with him.

Lions? Awesome.

Baked potatoes? Delicious!



THIS IS Rex.

He's just your ordinary brainiac. Who wears a bunny suit. And carries a briefcase.

Alley has a gift for making bad choices. Rex is a genius for planning good solutions. But after Alley's latest stunt goes a teensy bit wrong (think "exploding burrito"), he's not sure if *anything* can save him. And if he doesn't get an A in science, he'll be sent away to the dreaded Steggle Academy. . . .

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JOEL ROSS is the author of the Fog Diver series and the Beast & Crown series. He's never worn a school uniform, but he did try a spoonful of calf's-foot jelly once. The taste lingers. Visit him at TheJoelJoel.com.



NICOLE MILES

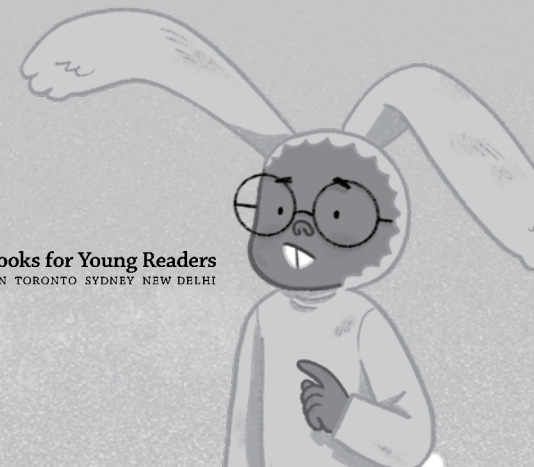
was born in the United States, but grew up in the Bahamas, where all schools have uniforms but nobody eats calf's-foot jelly (as far as she is aware). She feels this is a fair compromise. She now lives in the United Kingdom, and her tiny place on the internet is NicoleMillo.com.

Alley & Rex

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written by
JOEL ROSS

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NICOLE MILES



 Atheneum Books for Young Readers
atheneum NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI



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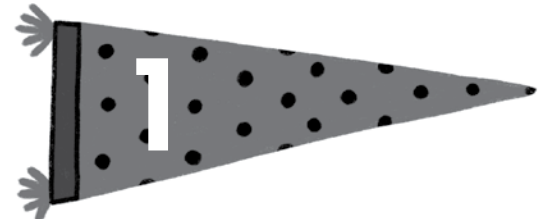


To the memory of my mother,
who read an early draft and said,
“So, nu? What’s my Bubbie/Blatt ratio?”
90/10, Mom.

—J. R.

To Mum and Dad, and especially Dyl

—N. M.



This is Blueberry Hill School, home of the Ladybugs. Look at the ordinary trees. Look at the ordinary buses.

Look at the ordinary kids.



Well, not that one.

Look at the ordinary clouds and crowds and
flagpole.

Now zoom in.



My name is Alex Katz and I don't make good choices.

At least, that's what my parents and teachers say . . . if they catch me.

After I slide down the flagpole, I blend into a crowd of fourth graders heading for the front doors. I'm a sixth-grade shape-shifter, blending into the background.

Stealthy.

Hidden.

Invisible.

I'm home free!

Then I hear a laugh. A mean, mocking laugh.

It's Cameron Sykes! He's in the seventh grade. When he became a hall monitor, he turned into the King of the Snitches. These days, he spends all his time:

- 1) patrolling the hallways wearing a homemade *#security* badge.
- 2) marching around grunting, "Hut, hut, hut . . ."
- 3) ratting on anyone who brings a phone to school.

4) posting embarrassing pictures of late kids to the school website.

Also, he once threw a grapefruit at me for running in the hallway. On cold days, I can still feel the juice stinging my eye.

And now he's picking on a little kid in a bunny suit. That's not a huge surprise. Cameron is a bully, and everyone knows you can't wear an adorable rabbit onesie to school unless it's Wear an Adorable Rabbit Onesie to School Day.

Which, if you check the calendar, it never is.

So I pause for a second to explain that we shouldn't pick on littler kids . . .



. . . and from across the yard, Principal Kugelmeyer yells, "Alley!"

Which is me, because nobody calls me Alex. How I got the nickname "Alley" Katz is a long story, though. You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

"It's only the third day of school," Principal Kugelmeyer says, after dragging me into her office. "Why were you climbing the flagpole?"

"It's a tradition," I tell her. "Like the Hill Build."

My school goes from kindergarten through eighth grade. Every year, the new third graders make a model of Blueberry Hill for the Hill Build Contest. For example, when I was a little kid, I convinced my class to slather blueberry jam onto a mound of helium balloons. It was awesome. Well, it didn't look anything like the school . . . but three years later, you can still see the stains on the ceiling. I call that a win.

"Nobody ever climbed the flagpole before," Principal Kugelmeyer tells me.

"That's because it's a *new* tradition," I inform her.

"And I don't want them to start now," she

continues, bulldozing over my excellent point. “You know the other kids copy you. Especially when you do something reckless like climbing the flagpole—which is not a tradition.”

“It *could* be. All traditions have to start somewhere.”

Think about it. A hundred years ago, some kids dressed in costumes FOR ABSOLUTELY NO REASON and pounded on a neighbor’s door, demanding candy.

The neighbor must’ve been like, “What art thou doing?” which is how they talked back then.

Then the kids said, “We art making a brand-new tradition called Halloween! Now hand over some Thrice Musketeers Bars, thou dorkfish, or with our TP shall we festoon thy house.”

I explain that to Principal Kugelmeyer, but she’s not interested in history. Honestly, I don’t know how these people keep their jobs.

“This is your one free pass,” she tells me, drumming her fingers on her desk. “In honor of the new school year.”

“Oh! Well, um, I hope you’re sitting down—”

“I *am* sitting down, Alley,” she says.

“—because I just thought of a way to honor the school year *ten times more!*”

“By giving you ten free passes?”

I gape at her. How did she guess?

“Alley,” she says.

“Here,” I report. “Present!”

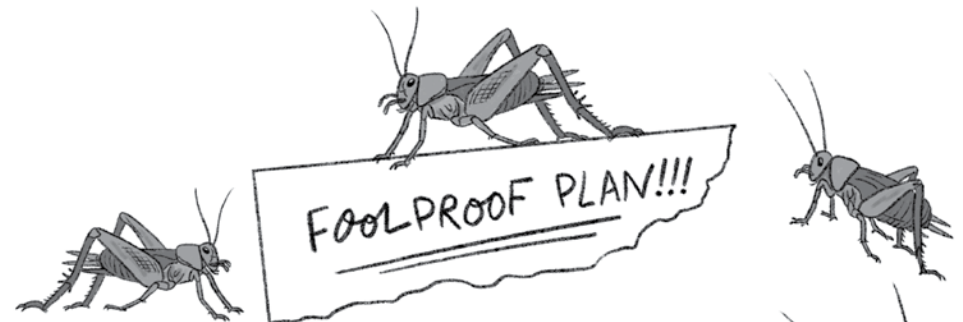
“This is your only chance. After last year . . .” She shudders. “You’ve been warned.”

“I didn’t know the crickets would do that.”

She exhales. “Just remember what we said about making better choices.”

“I will,” I promise.

And I’ll keep that vow, because I have a . . .



Last year, I made a few bad choices (also, I learned that you can order thousands of live crickets online) and almost got expelled.

So this year, I'll make *lots* of choices. Dozens and dozens of choices. That way, I'm sure to make some good ones, which will balance things out.

See? Foolproof!

Except Principal Kugelmeyer says, "I'm glad to hear that, Alley. And I'm calling your parents in for a talk, to make sure you don't forget."

That's why my dad meets me after school, in the principal's office. He's holding his phone in front of him to show my mother what's going on.



"What were you thinking?" Dad says.

"You could've fallen and broken your head!" Mom tells me.



"Worse," Dad grumbles, "he could've broken the head of a kid who *uses* their head."

Mom sighs. "Alley just isn't a good fit with traditional education."

"On the other hand," I say, to make her feel better, "I'm *great* at Extreme Schooling."

Weirdly, this does not cheer her up.

The principal and my dad take turns scolding me. My parents are too nice to punish me, though. I've given them tips, but they never learn.



So when they're really mad, they threaten me with Grannie Blatt.

