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## First Opinion: From Heartbreak to Triumph

Clayton A. Copeland PhD

University of South Carolina - Columbia, copelan2@email.sc.edu

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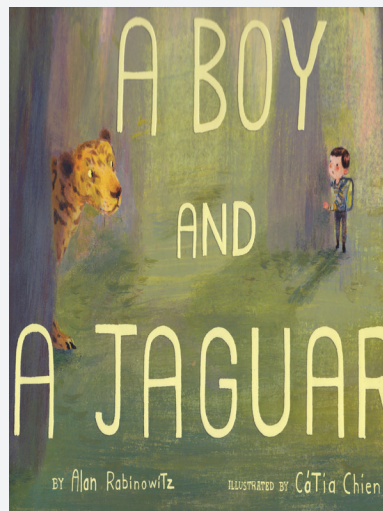
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Rabinowitz, Alan. *A Boy and a Jaguar*. Illus. Catia Chien.  
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Print.

*Clayton Copeland*



*A Boy and a Jaguar* is a timeless, true story of heartbreak and triumph; a story of the strengths and the abilities realized through adversities. An autobiographical piece written by Allen Rabinowitz, *A Boy and a Jaguar* shares the story of the author's own childhood, his long-time struggle with stuttering, and his quest to overcome it.

Beautiful acrylic and charcoal pencil illustrations envelope the reader. Their gentleness and wordless messages lull us into the story in such a way that it seems as though we are walking each step of this journey alongside the author. Tides of heartache flow as we walk with this young child and see him taunted by notions that his challenges somehow leave him "less than" or broken. Placed in a class for "disturbed" children because he "disrupts the class," Rabinowitz begins to question himself and his worth. "The teachers think I am broken. Am I?" he asks himself (unpagged).

We see Rabinowitz robbed of his time of childhood innocence and of the unadulterated joy all children deserve. He lives a childhood plagued not only by the challenges of overcoming his stuttering, but by sometimes harsh, unkind actions of those around him. The emptiness created by his adversities, however, along with his connections with animals, creates room for growth and blossoming in unimaginable capacities. Emptiness that could have turned to bitterness becomes strength of character, determination, and ability.

With animals, for animals, he finds his voice. Each day when he comes home from school, Rabinowitz runs to his room. “I bring out my pets—a hamster, a gerbil, a green turtle, a chameleon, and a garter snake. I close the door and talk to them. Without stuttering. I tell them my dreams. I tell them that I want to be able to speak like everyone else” (unpaged).

In *Animals*, Rabinowitz finds trusted companions and the truest of friends. “Animals can’t get the words out, just as I can’t get the words out. So people misunderstand or hurt them, the same way people ignore or misunderstand or hurt me” (unpaged). In *Animals*, Rabinowitz first finds kindred spirits. He is particularly inspired by the big cats at the zoo. Socially prescribed expectations attempt to hold our young protagonist captive just as the bars housing an aging, sad Jaguar at the zoo hold her. The powerful bond between animals and a young Rabinowitz lead him to make a promise to animals, a promise that if he can ever find his voice, he will be their voice and keep them from harm.

Perhaps more for the animals than even for himself, we watch as a young Rabinowitz finds his own voice and simultaneously becomes the voice for the animals who helped him find his purpose. With courage and conviction, Rabinowitz becomes a zoologist, conservationist, and CEO of his own nonprofit, Pathera, an organization dedicated to protecting the world’s 36 wild cat species.

As the story concludes, readers see Rabinowitz standing before the Prime Minister in the capital city of Belize and delivering a 15-minute plea to protect jaguars and their natural habitat. In this moment, we are privileged to see not only an extraordinary man, but also the extraordinary abilities that are often born through adversities. The same sureness of purpose and strength that Rabinowitz sees in the wild cats of the jungle is now realized in himself.

Through this incredible story, Rabinowitz takes his readers by the hand—and by the heart—to share his lived experience. As no other experience can, the lived experience conveys a message that each person is uniquely and differently able. Whether labeled as having a disability or not, no one is exempt from challenges. While some challenges are more visible or readily apparent than others, all challenges create a journey of becoming for our abilities. They create opportunities that would not otherwise exist and voices that would not otherwise be heard.

### **Works Cited**

Rabinowitz, Alan. *A Boy and a Jaguar*. Illus. Catia Chien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014. Print.

### **About the Author**

**Clayton Copeland** teaches Foundations of Library and Information Science, Information Literacy and Information Resources, and Planning Library Facilities in the College of Mass Communications and Information Studies at the University of South Carolina, Columbia South Carolina. Her research focuses upon equity of access to information for underserved populations and literacy.