

Half Brother by Kenneth Oppel. Scholastic Press, 2010. 375 pages

Thirteen-year-old Ben Tomlin has always been an only child. His life turns upside down when his father, a respected behavioral scientist, uproots the family and moves across the country to begin a new, ground-breaking project.

Zan, the baby chimpanzee at the heart of the project, was taken from his mother when he was just eight days old. Ben's parents are raising Zan as a member of their family and teaching him American Sign Language.

Ben's parents have asked him to treat Zan like a baby brother. Reluctant at first, Ben soon finds himself falling in love with the tiny chimp, and Ben quickly becomes Zan's favorite. In fact, it is Ben that teaches Zan his first sign, "hug." Encouraged by Ben's rapport with Zan, Dr. Tomlin makes Ben a research assistant on Project Zan.

In the beginning, Zan learns words naturally as he is interacting with his family and the research assistants from the university. Zan is very bright, picking up new words easily and using them spontaneously. But with a major grant deadline looming, Ben's father becomes convinced that Zan's education must be more structured. Worried that Ben's emotional attachment to Zan might interfere with his ability to objectively document Zan's progress, Dr. Tomlin removes Ben from the project.

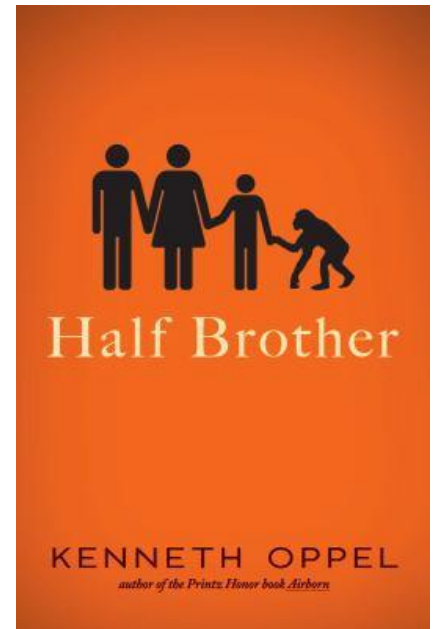
The first major blow to the project comes when they don't get the grant. Dr. Tomlin is rattled, but determinedly tries to pull the funding together using several smaller grants. Dr. Greg Jaworski, a linguist from Berkley, joins the project to document Zan's acquisition of language, in hopes that their data will be strong enough to win the big grant next year.

The second blow to the project is part of a *60 Minutes* piece on Project Zan. Overall, the piece is positive, and includes lots of wonderful footage of Zan interacting with his family and caregivers. But a disgruntled former employee releases a photo of Zan that raises questions about the ethics of using apes in experiments.

Dr. Jaworski's findings are the final blow. He believes that Zan is learning words, but not language. In an instant, the project is over and Zan's future is uncertain. Ben is shocked when the university signs Zan over to a research institute in Nevada. He is supposed to be consoled by the fact that it's not a biomedical research institute, but Ben can't help feeling that he's just left his baby brother in a cage.

Author Kenneth Oppel has crafted a gripping and heartfelt exploration of the relationship between Ben and his "brother." Through Ben's eyes, readers consider exactly what makes humans "human". Is it our ability to communicate, or our super useful opposable thumbs? Is it our capacity for kindness, love and empathy? Underneath the surface, where our most primitive instincts and urges are born, are humans really that different from our closest animal kin?

Half Brother doesn't offer any easy answers, but it is an achingly beautiful, unforgettable story.



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