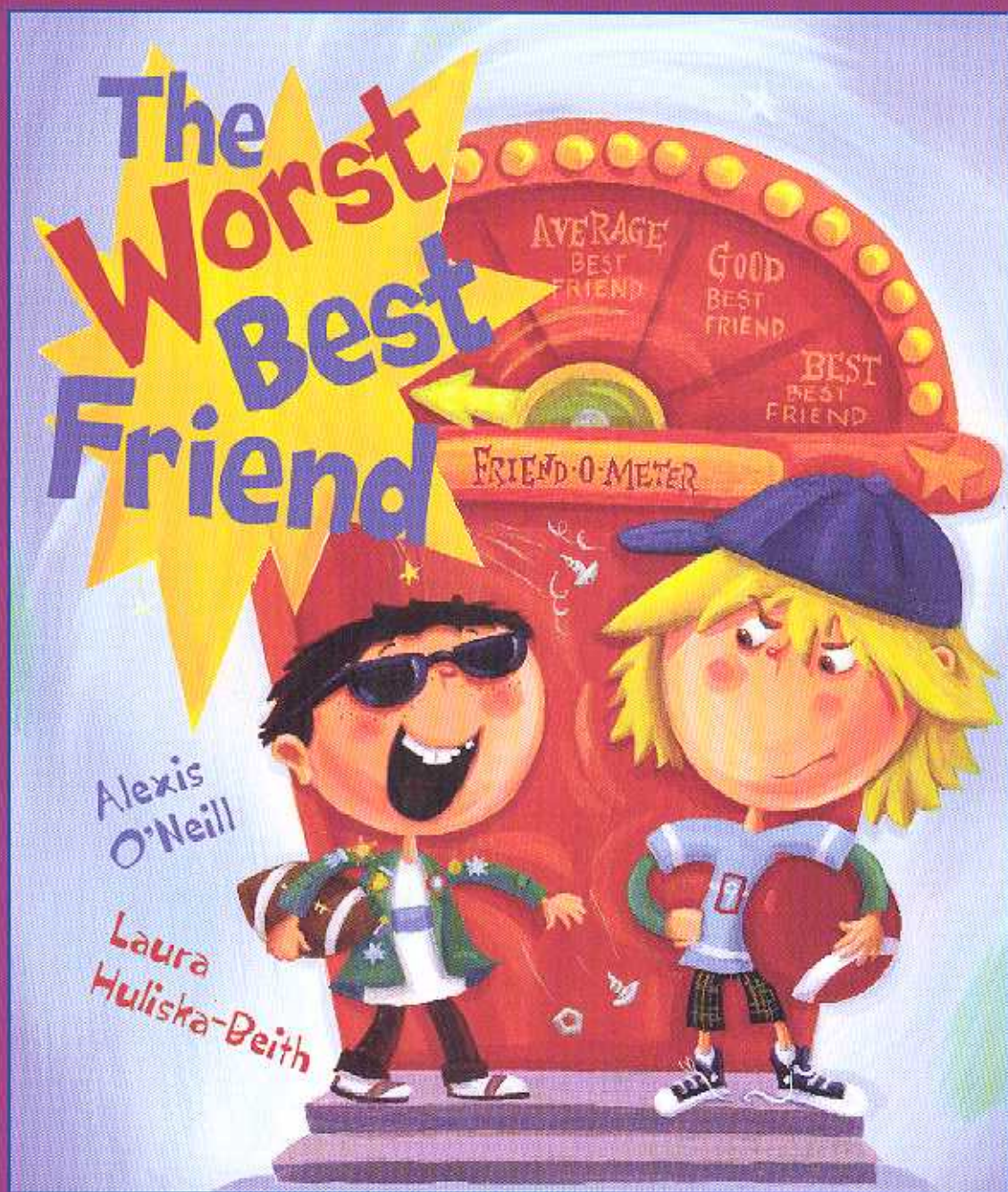


# The California Reader

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# about the cover

HELEN FOSTER JAMES



## *The Worst Best Friend*

BY ALEXIS O'NEILL

I love attending the California Reading Association's annual conference. Last year, I treated myself to their author evening dessert event. Alexis O'Neill had graciously stepped in at the last minute to replace an author who was unable to attend. She was fabulous. Later, I had the chance to chat with her and she told me about *The Worst Best Friend*. I knew immediately that I wanted to feature Alexis and her newest book. Here's what she wanted to share with you, but you'll also want to visit her website at [www.alexisonell.com](http://www.alexisonell.com) to learn more about her and her work.

"One day, a second grader rapped my arm. "I know what your books are about," she said. I thought she was going to say, "loud kids" or "bullies" or "dancing lessons." But she said, "All your books are about friendship." And she was right.

Through her eyes, I could see that each of my books explores friendship from different angles. *Loud Emily*: Friends accept you for who you are and appreciate your special qualities. *Estela's Swap*: Friends can be any age. *The Recess Queen*: Accepting friendship from unlikely people can lead to surprising results. *The Worst Best Friend*: Staying friends can be challenging, but true-blue friends are loyal.

Coming up with a story after *The Recess Queen* didn't come easy. In January 2006, my editor, Leslie Buchick, lit a fire under me. She said that illustrator Laura Huliska-Beith was booked through 2012. But if I could get a manuscript to her RIGHT NOW, she'd work on my book first. Wow! Nothing like a deadline to get creative juices flowing. So I did what any self-respecting author should do: I went to Las Vegas.

Okay. So I didn't go there to bet. Or see the shows (sigh). Instead, while my husband, David, was attending a conference, I stayed in the room and wrote a really bad story draft. We returned home to laundry, dishes and email. And by May, after many revisions, I had a story to submit.

I dedicated *The Worst Best Friend* to my dad, Ernest "Tip" O'Neill, and his lifelong, best, best friend, John Mahoney. My dad worked in a clothing factory. John was a lawyer. Dad attended Boston English High School while John attended the rival, Boston Latin. They teased each other about this endlessly. But they were loyal friends from childhood until the day they died, one not long after the other.

So—my newest book is dedicated to Dad and John, and to best, best friends everywhere."

Helen Foster James ([www.helenfosterjames.com](http://www.helenfosterjames.com)) can be reached at [hfores@san.rr.com](mailto:hfores@san.rr.com). She is the author of *S is for Sweets: A Camping Alphabet*.

