

Book of the Year*



By **Robert Greene Sands**

[Email the author](#)

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"I want you to sit down on the couch so I can read the Book of the Year to you," my wife Alli said to me one Saturday morning recently.

"A whole book?" I asked.

"Don't worry, its mostly pictures and a little bit of text."

Not knowing what to expect, I joined her on the couch.

She put this small hardcover book on the coffee table in front of us.

"It's the Book of the Year," she repeated, as if to reinforce why I should want to read it, "The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and The Horse. It's different. You'll love it."

"What? A kid's book?"

"Your wife wants you to listen to her read a book," she said, matter-of-factly.

"Well, if you put it that way, how can I resist?" Seeing her frown, I quickly added, "I mean, yes, I want to read it with you."

"That's better."

She opened the cover of the book like she was reading to a child.

No comment.

She started reading the title out loud, her voice still scratchy from our shared holiday respiratory infection. When she got to the word "Mole," the sound became painful to hear.

"Stop," I said, like fingernails on a chalkboard. My own voice not much better, "I want to read it with you; let's read together silently," I croaked.

She nodded gratefully. "I want to make sure you read it."

We went back to the title page, and I mentally finished the title, and added "by Charlie Mackesy."

For the next 15 minutes, we silently followed the simple, and at first glance, almost childlike sketches of a lonely boy's journey over an English countryside. As he travels, he collects three pawed companions, a talkative mole, a mostly silent fox and a reassuring horse. The conversation with his newfound friends takes the form of questions and answers, often just a sentence or two per page, meandering like the foursome's journey.

Innocent, yet profound, sometimes haunting and sometimes hopeful questions like, “What do we do when our hearts hurt?” “Home isn’t always a place, is it?” or statements like, “Often the hardest person to forgive is yourself,” reveal the commonality of feelings and beliefs that extend beyond one religion or people to what unites us all as humans.

Halfway through our silent reading, we found each other’s hand. Other than the sound of Alli turning book pages, my own brief and quiet asides like “wow” or “powerful” occasionally broke the silence. Truth is, perhaps I only think I formed actual words. Maybe they were just utterances of significance, without the shape of words, that came from a place deep in me I don’t often visit.

I do remember leaning back against the couch after reading this entry, “What is the bravest thing you’ve ever said?” The horse answered, “Help.”

I let that passage wash over me. Not for long. The story drew me back.

When we had finished, it felt like we had just started. We talked about the book’s impact on not only us, but how it spoke to members of our families, friends and the veterans we work with — everyone, really. Those questions and answers still linger in my mind.

Often, as kids, even as adults, we don’t pursue answers to existential questions that might keep us up at night, because we fear the blowback or how we might be perceived as weak or fragile by friends, peers or others, just for asking them. And then there is the trust factor: not everybody has a council to appeal to like the mole, the fox and the always trusty horse.

Stoicism isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, especially if one is struggling from abuse, trauma or abandonment, or any number of personal issues, having learned to avoid the tough questions because the rule of the playground was “Don’t cry.”

In the words of the horse, Mackesy says, “Asking for help isn’t giving up ... It’s refusing to give up.”

*Waterstones Book of the Year – UK prize selected by the independent publishing house Waterstones based on nominations from commercial booksellers.