

Calvin Johnston's secret is out. He and his brothers are tainted. Untouchable. And the bad blood flowing through their veins is threatening to kill them. So are some of their neighbors in Ashland, the "Friendliest Little Town" in Florida. The Johnston brothers are kicked out of everything—school, baseball, scouts, even church. Ashland's anger has erupted into a fireball of hate. The only silver lining is that Calvin's best friend Izzy lives 65 miles away at the beach, and has no idea about his secret. But news has a way of spreading. Calvin and his brothers are in the fight of their lives. As a matter of fact, they're fighting for life itself.

"This startling, moving, powerhouse of a verse novel should be read by every middle grader and YA reader in the US, actually in the world. It doesn't simply play on the heartstrings but is a full orchestral rendition of a human story that needs telling and retelling to bring us all back into our humanity."

—Jane Yolen, author of *Owl Moon* and *The Devil's Arithmetic*

"Blood Brothers captivated me from the very first sentence, 'Charlie is the best at dying.' This book will break your heart in all the right places and leave you a more compassionate human being."

—Shannon Hitchcock, author of *Flying Over Water* and *One True Way*

"Blood Brothers is an astonishing book. A beautiful book. A necessary book. Once I started reading it, I could not put it down. This gorgeously written novel-in-verse shows us the devastating consequences of hate, but more importantly, it teaches us the infinite power of love."

—Léslea Newman, author of *October Mourning: A Song for Matthew Shepard*

"Overflowing with sadness and hope, Sanders has written a celebration of poetry and family that is also a portrait of America as we were (and still are). An important book to share and discuss with middle-grade readers: a lightening bolt to the heart."

—E. Lockhart, author of *We Were Liars*

BLOOD BROTHERS

ROB SANDERS



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BOOKS

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BLOOD BROTHERS

by Rob Sanders

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DAY 1
SATURDAY
AUGUST 15, 1987

1

Charlie is the best at dying.

I watch him across the beach.
He scans the clouds.
Presses his stick rifle against one shoulder.
Aims out over the waves.
The wind licks at his sun-bleached hair,
ruffling tufts of it over
his squinted eyes.

I dig good trenches.

Three of them line up side-by-side,
fortified with driftwood
anchored deep in the
oatmeal-colored sand.

Swaying salt grass hides the
trenches from our
invisible enemy.

The beach.
Our beach.
The perfect place to battle.
The perfect place to fight.

The safest perfect place we know.

Attackers! Curtis calls. High noon!

Man your stations, I order.
I push my body against the grit.
Eyes dart across the horizon.
From cloud to cloud.
East to west.
I spot them.
Wait for it . . . wait for it . . . NOW!

Rat-a-tat-tat.

Th-th-th-th-th-th.

Kapow. Kapow. Kapow.

Driftwood weapons fire.

Charlie's elbows rest
on the rim of one trench.
He fires again and again and again.

Kapow. Bang-bang. Kapow.

Curtis crouches nearby,
curls of brown hair
stuck to his forehead
His body recoiling
with each
stick-rifle
blast.

Incoming! Charlie hollers.

I scramble into the trench
with my brothers.
We hunker down,
like in the tornado drills
back at Ashland Elementary.

We take a blow.
Handfuls of sand rain down.

Rat-a-tat-tat.

Kapow. Kapow. Kapow.

Th-th-th-th-th-th.

I'm hit, Charlie groans.

He waves his arms, spins,
falls face-first into the sand,
flops his legs, sputters, spits.
Takes one last breath.

Always the best at dying.

Damn them! Curtis screams—
breaking one of Momma's rules.

He aims,
slowly moving the barrel of
his weapon, tracing the path
of the enemy planes.
The ones only
he can see.
He fires.
Curses at the clouds.

Ka-plew. Ka-plew. Ka-plew.

Charlie may die good,
but Curtis wins for sound effects.
Take that, he hollers.

My shoulder, I yell,
dropping my weapon.
Both hands clutch
my wound and I fall back,
back,
back
into the sandy pit.

Curtis jerks, gasps.

They got me, too.
He tumbles in beside me.

One sweaty dead brother
on the right.
Another on the left.

Anger rises from my belly,
higher and higher
until it pushes
out through
my lips.
My brothers, I scream.
Not my brothers!

I claw up
out of the pit.
Try to stand.
Sway.
Gain my balance.
Aim.
Pull the trigger . . .

nothing.

Pull it again . . .

nothing.

I'm out of am . . .

Rat-a-tat-tat. Rat-a-tat-tat.

The word *ammo*
sticks in my throat.
It's my turn to moan.
Grabbing my gut, I collapse
back into the trench on top
of Curtis and Charlie.
My legs too long
to fit inside.

We lay still.
Quiet.
Waves, sea gulls,
and our heavy breathing—
the only sounds we hear.

*Let's play again, Charlie says
from under the pile.*

*Only if we don't have to die again,
Curtis replies.*

*Ain't gonna happen, I say.
That's the way we play this game.
No changes allowed.*

It always ends like this—
panting,
sweating,
hearts pounding.
And then we're dead.

The Johnston brothers—
side by side,
motionless,
bodies in the ground.

My sweat-soaked T-shirt
feels like a weight, pushing
me deep into the sand.
Sweat rolls off my forehead,
streaks down my cheeks,
runs through the creases of my neck.

Change the game? Nope.
I'm keeping things—anything,
everything—the same.
Keeping things—anything,
everything—from changing more than they already have.
Even a stupid game of war at the beach.
No changes allowed.

Lying in a pit with my brothers . . . again.
Playing dead . . . again.
I'm okay with that.
Okay with keeping
things exactly
the same.