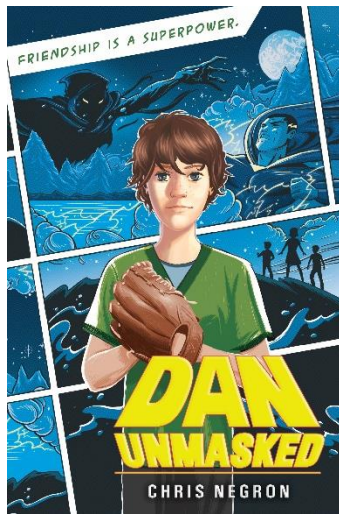


Dear Reader,

In 1984 I was thirteen, and things felt like they were *happening*. The San Diego Padres, my favorite baseball team, were on their way to their first World Series. Alpha Flight #12, a comic that showed me what stories could do, was published. I was experiencing my first real awakening.

As a kid, it's exciting to believe everything is being made especially for you. Like all the new, exciting things in the world are yours. But there's another side to those feelings, a darker side.

That same year one of my best friends was injured at our baseball practice. I remember feeling overwhelmed when we visited him later in the hospital. Another new experience in my year full of them, but this one wasn't so special or exciting. It was scary.



Years later, I wondered. What if I had thought my friend's accident was my fault? What if his injury had been more serious? How would I have reacted? Those what-ifs created *Dan Unmasked*. In my book, Dan's best friend Nate also suffers an injury at practice, except he falls into a serious coma. Even worse, Dan grabbed Nate's arm in an attempt to get his attention just as the accident happened. Dan feels responsible. He spends the rest of the book trying to figure out how to save his friend and, though he probably doesn't understand it completely at first, himself, too.

This book is for all the kids approaching that same time of hyper-vulnerability in their lives. It's for the kids already there. It's for all the kids getting slammed full force with so many new experiences. The good, exciting, happy ones. And the scary, sad ones, too.

My hope is that *Dan Unmasked* might help to reveal some really important truths to those kids.

1. Heroes are everywhere, and even if you don't always recognize them because they're not always wearing capes, they're on your side.
2. It's super okay to be vulnerable, to love the things you love. To shout out to the world how amazing that comic you read was. Or how much you admire your best friend.
3. It's even more okay to let someone know if something's bothering you a little bit too much. The adults in your life are capable of helping you with a lot more than you can imagine.

As I explored Dan's story more and more, so many of these messages emerged, at first from my own experiences, then from his. Dan was overwhelmed a lot. I could feel it through my fingertips as I typed. So I hope his story finds the young people out there who might be feeling the same way. And I hope maybe it helps them out, even if it's just a little bit.

Thank you so much for reading and sharing it.

Sincerely,
Chris Negron