MEET THE AUTHOR

Nate Ball is the host of the Emmy and Peabody Award Winning PBS reality shows Design Squad and Design Squad Nation. An MIT graduate with a Master’s Degree in mechanical engineering, Nate is also the co-founder of Atlas Devices, a two time All-American pole vaulter, and a competitive beatboxer. He lives with his wife in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The adventure begins in this exciting new chapter book series, complete with do-it-yourself experiments!

In Alien in My Pocket: Blast Off!, a four-inch tall alien crash-lands through Zack McGee’s bedroom window. But soon Zack realizes that rather protect the world from the alien, it’s up to him to protect the alien from the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Book 1)

1. Zack McGee thinks that he might have a disease that makes him fall asleep in the middle of doing something, which is known as narcolepsy. Do you think Zack actually has narcolepsy? Why or why not?

2. What are the three wishes Zack makes when he sees what he thinks is a shooting star?

3. Read the description of the object that crash lands into Zack’s room. Using direction from the written text, draw what you think the foreign pod looks like.

4. Why does Zack laugh when he meets Amp for the first time?

5. When Zack chases after Amp in the dark, he trips and falls over many different objects in his house. What are all the items Zack falls over, into, or on?

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ALIEN IN MY POCKET

Blast Off!
ALIEN IN MY POCKET

Blast Off!

by Nate Ball
illustrated by Macky Pamintuan

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There are times I think I might have that disease that makes people fall asleep right in the middle of doing something.

It’s a real disease. I saw it on a TV show once. This guy who had the disease fell asleep while eating a bowl of cream of potato soup. Splash! Face first.

Once I fell asleep just thinking about spelling.

Anyway, the thought crossed my mind one night when I woke up with my face planted in a book. I had fallen asleep while studying for my first science quiz of the new school year.

You’d think static electricity would be the kind of subject that would interest a kid like me, but it wasn’t. Not a spark of interest. Just sudden onset snoozing.

I jerked awake at my small, wobbly desk. My neck was stiff. My arm was numb. My mouth felt
like a bird had died in it.

Our house was eerily quiet. My little brother’s room on the other side of the wall was silent. My parents had forgotten to say good night again. Both were trying to meet deadlines for “breakthrough experiments” and “research grants.”

I switched off my little desk light. “That’s enough studying for one night,” I whispered in a croaky voice.

I lurched over to my window and pushed it open. From my second-story window, I had a good view of our dark and silent backyard. I sighed and leaned forward, my forehead against the screen. I guess I started to fall back asleep, because the next thing I knew the screen popped out of its frame and fell to the dim backyard below—and I nearly followed it down.

“Yipes,” I whispered at the thought of spending fourth grade in a body cast.

My window screen had landed somewhere in the darkness, behind the bushes. At least I can lean out my window now, I thought.

I looked over at the house next to ours to see if Olivia’s light was on. It wasn’t.
Olivia has lived across the hedge from me pretty much forever. Our homes are so close that if the wind is blowing right she can fire a marshmallow with her marshmallow bazooka from her room and hit me in the face.

I was about to slide the window shut and collapse on my bed when I noticed a shooting star. A little good luck was just what I needed. I shut my eyes and quickly made a wish—actually three wishes at once: to finally make the travel baseball team, to get better grades, and to avoid detention all year. Why not make the most of the opportunity?

When I opened my eyes the falling star was still falling.

That’s weird, I thought.

Falling stars usually last only half a second or so. But this one was streaking slowly from left to right across the night sky, heading toward the moon.

As I watched its flight, it looked like the falling star was falling slower—and getting bigger. I rubbed my eyes and leaned out my window as far as I could without falling out. The star was falling slower! And getting bigger!
I wondered for a second if this was one of Olivia’s tricks. I looked over at her window again, but her entire house was dark and still.

I looked back into the night sky as the thing U-turned in my direction. It floated and weaved, a spray of orange and yellow sparks behind it.

This was so not a falling star.

And with a squeak of horror, I realized it was going to crash into my house.

In fact, it was going to crash into my bedroom!

I reached to slam my window shut, but before I could, the ball of fire lit up my backyard with sparks and flares and filled the neighborhood with a loud hissing sound.

I ducked—and just in time. The burning ball careened through the window.

It streaked over my head and thumped hard against the wall behind me.

The hissing sound stopped and was replaced by a grinding noise and then a quiet beeping sound.

My room was filled with smoke.

The lamp next to my bed had been knocked over.

There was a big, black burn mark above my bed and a basketball-size dent in the wall.
And resting on my comforter was a shiny, metal, football-shaped thing with little wings sticking out near one of the points. Steam sizzled out through tiny holes on either side and it continued to make a worrisome grinding noise. Like this: *GRUNK! GRUNK! GRUNK! GRUNK! GRUNK!*

I stared at it, wide-eyed, waiting for the thing to explode. I was too shocked to move.
As the seconds passed, I realized the steaming, football-shaped thingy that had just landed on my bed was not going to blow up.

But what was it? A satellite? Part of a plane? A piece of the International Space Station?

I was about to bolt out of my bedroom door and scream my head off for my parents, for my little brother, for our dog, for our cat—but something stopped me.

Instead, I crawled over to my bed to get a closer look and came face-to-face with the shiny, football-shaped silver ball about the size of a barbecued chicken. Its gleaming skin seemed alive somehow. I could have reached out and touched it, but I didn’t dare. It looked hot, and it was still making noises too weird to describe.
A loud click sounded, a tiny door sighed open, and a tiny set of stairs slowly folded down. Each step had a glowing strip of orange light, like in a dark movie theater.

And then a blue figure no bigger than my hand ducked his head out the door and stepped out onto the top of the stairs!

He coughed into his fist while waving the smoke away with his other hand.

I didn’t know if I should laugh or scream. I felt stuck between amused and terrified—until I realized I hadn’t thought to breathe in who knew how long.

I must have gasped or coughed. Or gasped-coughed. Because that’s when it saw me. The little guy sank into a crouch and pulled a tiny remote control from the belt around his waist.

“Do not move, Earth person,” he said in a squeaky, high-pitched voice.

He aimed his remote control at me. “I am Amp, lead scout from the plant Erde. According to the laws of Interplanetary Domination, you are now my prisoner!”

I think my reaction to this tiny guy’s warning
had the opposite effect he was hoping for: I started cracking up. It was just hilarious. He wanted to sound tough and dangerous, but instead he sounded like a furious squirrel.

He didn’t like my reaction. He aimed his remote control and fired at the tip of my nose. It felt like being zapped by static electricity—surprising, unpleasant, but not really painful. He growled in frustration, looked at his static gun, and then zapped me again.

“That hurts, you know,” I told him, taking his zap gun away with two fingers.

“This is all wrong!” he squeaked in his funny
voice. “Why are you so big?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” I said, rubbing my nose. “Why are you so small?”

My response seemed to make him even more frustrated. He snatched the helmet off his head and flung it at me with a grunt. Smaller than half an eggshell, it bounced off my chest and fell silently to the carpet.

I noticed each of his hands had only a thumb and two chubby fingers.

Not thinking, I picked him up by the collar. He kicked and waved his arms crazily. He was really soft and warm, the way I imagine a hamster would feel if you shaved it and painted it blue.

“What are you?” I
asked. “Where did you come from, little guy?”

“I am not a little guy, and I am not from around here,” he announced in his funny high-pitched voice. “And I am very dangerous.”

And before I could stop him, he bit my finger.

I dropped him onto my bed, and he bounced away. I lunged for him, but he jumped off my bed before my hand could close around him.

I couldn’t let him get away!

But by the time I made it around my bed, he had climbed up my chair and jumped onto my desk, and he was heading toward my open window.

With one last desperate leap, I dove for him just as he leaped up and out my window—and into the darkness below.
What had I done?

For a moment, I stared into the blackness below my window, searching for any sign of the tiny visitor. I wanted to call out his name, but I had forgotten what it was!

I leaned out my window and whispered in desperation, “Hello? Can you hear me, Tramp? Or was it Stamp? Lamp? Cramp? Oh, what the heck is your name?”

No answer.

I started to panic and shouted in frustration, “Little blue dude, where’d you go?”

I’d let an alien escape from my room! Mankind would want to ground me for eternity!

I couldn’t even remember the planet he said he was from. Was it Fergie? Murky? I should have paid
attention. Why couldn’t I ever pay attention?!!

I bolted to my door and, taking a deep breath, opened it slowly and quietly. I so didn’t want to wake my family. Once there was enough space to squeeze through, I took off down the dark hallway, not aware that one of my brother’s robots had parked itself just outside my room.

I tripped over it, of course, and went sprawling onto the carpet, flipping the robot onto its back like a helpless tortoise. Its motor sprang to life, its wheels started spinning crazily, and its headlights lit up the carpet at a crazy angle.

I held my breath for a moment—and amazingly, no one woke up.

I picked the robot up and used its headlights to make my way downstairs. I saw the light was on in my parents’ office as I headed toward the back door. I tried to be careful to make sure they hadn’t seen me, but while looking back over my shoulder I ran into the entryway table, knocking a bowl full of keys and change on the floor!

My future as a burglar did not seem bright.

With no time to spare I crept out the front door and closed it quietly behind me.
I burst through the gate to the side of our house and sprinted into the backyard. The light from the robot had gone dead by then—which is probably why I didn't see our barbecue.

We have one of those old-fashioned barbecues, the charcoal kind, which is a good thing because if we had the gas kind, I would have blown myself up when I crashed into it.

Instead, I flipped over the top and hit the ground like an eighty-pound bag of onions.

The round, black barbecue, which looked a bit like a spaceship itself, toppled over, spitting out chalky charcoal dust all over me.

It took a split second for me to understand what happened next. But apparently the barbecue rolled into our birdbath, which is wobbly and unsteady even under normal conditions.

And the birdbath, which was filled with dirty bird water, wobbled briefly before losing its battle with gravity. It fell with a thud and cracked in half. A second later, a wave of feather-filled, freezing-cold birdbath water washed over me.

The water mixed with the charcoal leftovers and created a gooey, sticky paste. I was covered
in it. As I tried to get up, I slipped and slid over our patio like a first-time ice skater.

As if to add to my misery, Olivia’s bedroom light snapped on then. “You have got to be kidding me,” I growled.

As her curtain pulled back, I stumbled behind our doghouse. Thank goodness Smokey now slept in the garage. He was a barker.

I did not have time to explain to Olivia why I was covered in gray paste and making enough noise to wake up half the neighborhood.

I had to find Shemp—or whatever his dang
name was—before he got away!

Wiping barbecue dust out of my ears, I thought I heard something.

I froze and listened until I heard it again, and then I strained and listened even harder to figure out where the sound was coming from.

But instead of the alien, I heard Olivia’s window slide open. “Zack, are you out there?”

I didn’t answer. I listened so hard for the sound I’d heard I thought my ears would fall off my head. “Help!” I heard.

The sound was so high, it was easy to think it was just my imagination.

It wasn’t.

I crawled on my hands and knees around the back of the doghouse and came face-to-face with Mr. Jinxy, our fat cat.

He had the blue guy pinned to the wall of the doghouse with a paw. He was playing with him, like some kind of blue mouse.

“Go find a real mouse, Mr. Jinxy,” I said, gently pushing him away from Amp.

I snatched up the tiny man. “Sorry about that,” I said quietly. “You okay?”
“What was that thing?” he squeaked from my hand.

“It’s a cat,” I said. “Cats are animals. People have them because . . . Well, people like to have cats because . . . Actually I don’t like cats, and I have no idea why we even have one.”

The blue guy stared at me for a long time. “Oh, well, that clears things up.”

I tiptoed in my squishy socks to our back door in relief.

“I knew it was you!” I heard Olivia call out from her open window. I’d completely forgotten about her. “What are you up to, Zack McGee?”

By this point, I was too exhausted for questions. I pretended not to hear and closed the door behind me. I knew I’d have a lot of explaining to do at the bus stop in the morning.