

Author Mike Bender has a lot to say about zilch in new children's book

By **DAVE MASON**
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

Mike Bender became inspired to write a children's book when he put his 5-year-old son, Kai, to bed one night.

"The idea came to me as I was sitting in the dark and staring out into nothing, into the pitch black," Mr. Bender, 42, told the News-Press by phone from his Los Angeles home. "You're waiting in the room for your kid to fall asleep. It's a very quiet moment for a parent.

"Then it came to me.

"Can I write a book about nothing?"

The answer was a definite yes.

Mr. Bender, a former Santa Barbara resident known for his books of photos of awkward moments, will read his recently released

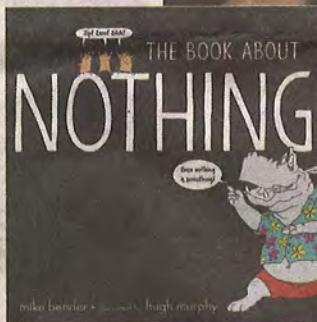
"The Book About Nothing" (Crown Books for Young Readers, \$17.99) at 2 p.m. Sunday at Chaucer's Books on upper State Street. Children and kids of all ages are welcome.

"The Book About Nothing," a funny yet philosophical book that has been named a Junior Library Guild selection, is aimed for ages 3 to 7.

As Mr. Bender wrote the book, he thought of his and his wife SuChin Pak's son Kai and 3-year-old daughter Soe's world, in which stimulation is constant with texting on phones, posting on social media, playing video games and watching TV.

"Just the idea that it's OK to just do absolutely nothing has become a foreign concept," said Mr. Bender, who lived in Santa Barbara in 2006-07. "We can't lose the value of sitting on the grass and not necessarily thinking or doing something or having a plan."

Mr. Bender said "The Book About Nothing" introduces philosophy to children in a fun, accessible way.



"Sometimes my kids are like, 'I'm bored and have nothing to do.'"

My response is, 'Great! Keep doing nothing! You're on to something here!'" said Mike Bender, author of "The Book About Nothing" (Crown Books for Young Readers, \$17.99).

"You're reading it to a group of kids, and they're laughing. How can something be nothing? That's silly," said Mr. Bender, who has read it to his kids' pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes at Third Street Elementary School in Los Angeles. He also read it to children at St. Robert Bellarmine Elementary School, a Catholic facility in Burbank.

He said the young audiences laughed hard at the beginning of the book, which features

synonyms for "nothing," such as "nil," "goose egg," "zippo," "nought" and the classic "diddly squat."

From there, the book features the author's insight about nothing, accompanied by artist Hugh Murphy's illustrations of animals ranging from a dodo bird to an ant eater.

An early page shows mice eating cookies and leaving a seemingly empty jar.

"Wrong," Mr. Bender writes. "It will be chock-full of nothing."

Another page shows a kangaroo with a skateboard, toy robot and more in his pouch in his bedroom.

"If you pick up all the toys in your room, there will be nothing on the floor (and that will make your parents happy)," the author writes.

On another page, a sloth lies in hammock, with toys lying all over the yard, and is doing absolutely nothing.

Which is something. "It's perfectly OK to do nothing," Mr. Bender told the News-Press.



COURTESY

"Sometimes my kids are like, 'I'm bored and have nothing to do.' My response is, 'Great! Keep doing nothing! You're on to something here!'"

"We know all of us have busy minds. All of us are thinking constantly throughout the day," he said. "It's extremely healthy to have nothing in your daily practice."

One page features a drawing of monkeys having a party to celebrate nothing.

Mr. Bender's point is you don't

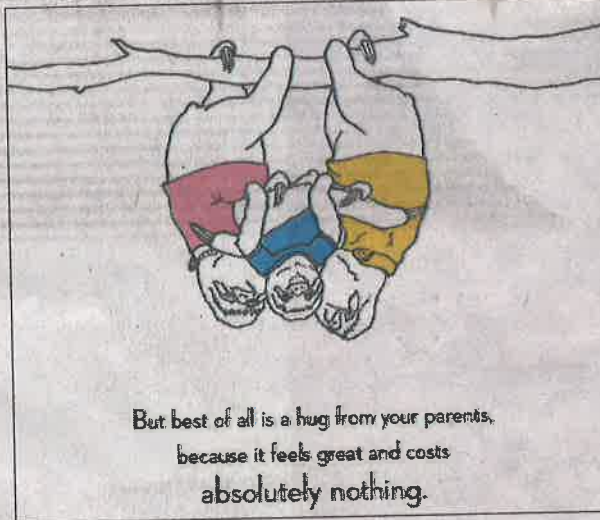
need a reason for a celebration.

On another page, a sloth gets a hug from his parents. Hugs cost nothing.

"Hugging my kids gives me a lot of good energy," Mr. Bender said. "It's one of those simple things in life that you don't have to buy, that doesn't cost anything. It's another way to access joy without having to do much."

But be careful, warns "The Book of Nothing." One two-page

Plans are underway for a restaurant



HUGH MURPHY ILLUSTRATIONS

At left, besides its humor, "The Book About Nothing" has a lot of heart, as shown on this page featuring sloths. At right, the book demonstrates nothing can mean something. Author Mike Bender liked the animals that illustrator Hugh Murphy picked for the book.

■ NOTHING

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spread shows what happens when an alligator puts nothing on his toothbrush.

He ends up with nothing in his mouth! So long, teeth.

"That was (inspired by) a conversation I had with my kids about brushing their teeth," Mr. Bender said.

Mr. Bender, a Morristown, N.J., native, graduated in 1993 from The Pingry School, a private K-12 school in Basking Ridge, N.J. He earned a bachelor's degree in English in 1997 at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vt.

He became a screenplay writer whose movies include "Not Another Teen Movie" (2001).

An awkward photo of a skiing trip with his father, Jules Bender of Santa Barbara, inspired him and Doug Chernack to start www.awkwardfamilyphotos.com in 2009. (The elder Mr. Bender and Rebecca Bender, Mike Bender's mother, continue to live in Santa Barbara.)

After beginning their website,

Mike Bender and Mr. Chernack went on to write four Three Rivers Press books: "Awkward Family Photos" (2010), "Awkward Family Pet Photos" (2011), "Awkward Family Holiday Photos" (2013) and "Born to be Awkward" (2015), featuring funny baby photos.

Mr. Bender made the transition to children's books when he and Mr. Chernack wrote "Everything is Awkward" (Crown Books for Young Readers, 2016). It featured awkward photos of kids.

The best of the awkward photos from Mr. Bender and Mr. Chernack's books and their website are in an exhibit, "Experience 33: Awkward," continuing through April at ESMoA, an art laboratory in El Segundo (<https://esmoa.org>).

"We would love to bring it to Santa Barbara," Mr. Bender said. "We would just have to find a venue there."

And Mr. Bender said plans are underway for a restaurant inspired by their awkward family photos, possibly in Los Angeles.

Mr. Bender, who feels he has found his niche with children's

books, plans to write another one for Crown Books for Young Readers. He said it will be called "The End" and will likely be out the next year or so.

"On Page 2, the book will say 'The End.' Can I write a children's book that starts with 'The End?'" Mr. Bender asked.

He said the answer is yes.

Mr. Bender said the book will show that endings simply set the stage for something new.

"The concept of the book is that endings are beginnings."

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IF YOU GO

Author Mike Bender will read "The Book About Nothing" (Crown Books for Young Readers, \$17.99), at 2 p.m. Sunday at Chaucer's Books, 3321 State St. (682-6787). His book is aimed at ages 3 to 7.

Mr. Bender and Doug Chernack continue to accept pictures at www.awkwardfamilyphotos.com.