It’s hard to know whether to give Steven Alper a hug or a good smack upside the head. That’s the feeling you get reading Jordan Sonnenblick’s, C’91, first novel, Drums, Girls & Dangerous Pie.

Steven is the book’s main character, a smart and smart-alecky kid whose 5-year-old brother suddenly falls ill with leukemia. The story follows Steven’s not-always-graceful struggle to keep it together while his parents mobilize all their energy and attention to save his little brother. The fact that Sonnenblick evokes such conflicting, true-to-life emotion says something about his literary craft. Drums was nominated as one of the American Library Association’s Best Books for Young Adults last year and was a Book Sense Children’s Pick by the American Booksellers Association. But it’s not just librarians and booksellers who have taken notice. The book has been getting a lot of buzz in the medical community too, as a resource for helping brothers and sisters of kids with cancer understand better how their life is being shaken up and poured out—even though they’re not the sick ones.

Sonnenblick is an eighth-grade English teacher. Several years ago, one of his students, “a bubbly and cheerful girl,” had a brother undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. In a parent-teacher conference, he commented on how well the girl was handling the situation. “Oh, she’s not handling it well,” the mom responded. “She’s hiding it well.”

That’s when he offered to find the girl a book. “She had the most wonderful parents,” he observes, “but siblings of kids who are in such heavy medical treatment always feel slighted or forgotten. I wanted her to have something to read that would help her through it, but I couldn’t find a book that I thought did the trick. So I wrote one.”

Sonnenblick did his research and had drafts checked by a pediatric oncologist and a child-life specialist who worked with families of cancer patients. Mostly, though, he relied on imagination. “I spend a ton of time with eighth-grade kids,” he points out. “Once you have their voices in your head, you can imagine what they’d do in a variety of situations.” To fill out Steven’s character, he drew on his own growing-up experiences as a drummer and a teenager with a “quick and sharp tongue”—not to mention a certain density at reading girls.

Drums didn’t start out looking like a success story. After writing the book, Sonnenblick looked up a couple veterans of Teach for America, which he had joined after graduating. The pair had started up a small publishing house. They liked the book and printed 5,000 copies. Then they went under. Stuck with a truckload of books, the broke publisher and disappointed author agreed to “go down nobly.” They donated the remaining 4,000 copies to SuperSibs, a national support group for brothers and sisters of cancer-stricken children. That’s when the book awards started to roll in, and Scholastic, the giant children’s book publisher, bought up the reprint rights along with the rights to Sonnenblick’s next novel, Gotcha!

Just three weeks before Drums was in print, the little brother of his former student died. “In a certain sense,” he muses, “I wrote it too late.” At his first book signing in a middle-school library (see photo) last fall, he looked up and spotted the student standing in line with family members. Both parents stayed home the next day and read Drums together. That evening, Sonnenblick received a phone call from the mom. “She said I’d gotten it right,” he reports. “I wanted her to have something to read that would help her through it, but I couldn’t find a book that I thought did the trick. So I wrote one.”

Information about SuperSibs is available at http://www.supersibs.org/ or 866-444-7427.

—PETER NICHOLS