

The Secret Zoo

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After witnessing the strange sight of several monkeys escaping the Clarksville City Zoo and coming into her neighborhood, Megan Nowicki starts a 3-month long journey of writing her thoughts and experiences in a diary. Only a few months later, the girl suddenly goes missing and her family and friends are devastated and unsure of where to turn to... at least until Noah Nowicki, Megan's brother, receives a mysterious note from a special bird at his window. Noah takes the clue and discusses a plan with his friends, Ella and Richie, aka the members of the "Action Scouts" club. Together, the special team goes on a dangerous but important mission to get to the bottom of the mystery and find Megan! And it all starts with a little trip to the Clarksville City Zoo, which Noah suspects is involved with Megan's disappearance. Pretty soon, the kids find out the zoo and animals in there are not what they expect at all. However as they begin to meet friends that know of Megan's whereabouts, the Action Scouts also bump into several suspicious zoo authorities that will do anything they can to keep "The Megan Situation" a secret from outsiders. With the help of a lot of the zoo animals as well as a little bit of magic, Noah, Ella and Richie embark on an exciting adventure to save Megan and bring her back home.

This book is for readers age 8-13. The characters themselves are elementary students. The content and writing style would be most appealing to younger audiences who prefer genres of adventure or fantasy. If they're also a fan of animals, I have little doubt that they will enjoy this novel.

I didn't initially realize this was more of a children's novel when I started reading it, but after I finished the book, I don't think it was too bad. The characters and personalities are nuanced and interesting. The Action Scouts do make a very spunky and brave trio. Additionally, I really like the characterization of the animal characters like Blizzard, Marlo and Podgy. I like the fact that the author gave them distinct qualities and differences that personified them and made them an essential part of the team to help save Megan. In terms of the plot, there was a pretty satisfying climax and resolution. However, leading up to the event of the climax, I feel like some momentum was lost and the novel seemed a bit fast-paced and less detailed or realistic. I hate being too critical about children's novels, because it goes to show how limited my imagination and feedback has become after growing up from that earlier part of my life. So in terms of an older teenage standpoint, the novel could have gone deeper and opened more paths that would have extended the complexity of the conflict and focus of the novel. Also, aside from the obvious things like talking animals and three young kids trespassing on a zoo grounds at midnight, some of the events seemed a bit unrealistic, in terms of being too good to be true. In other words, some scenes seemed to coincidentally go perfectly well in the kids' favor. There wasn't too many struggles, plot twists or anything else unpredictable that had me on the edge of my seat. However, from another viewpoint, more specifically a child's viewpoint, I don't think this simple style of storytelling is bad in any way. Honestly, classifying it as "simple" is a bit subjective. The secrets of the zoo really did delve deeper than I expected and in one part of the novel, there's a little bit of a history lesson that the kids hear about, concerning the origins of the special zoo. Mythical creatures and "monsters" are also added in the novel to increase the challenge, and their backstory and reason of existence does tie well into the zoo secrets.

So really overall, I don't think it's a bad book. It does make a pretty good first impression as the first book in the series. It just definitely has a more unique style of storytelling that would be most appreciated by children. Despite this, I think some of the seemingly simple topics or events that happened, may run deeper and give readers more insight and information in future novels. The ending cliffhanger gives me the impression that there is still very much to learn about the zoo, the people there, the magic embedded in the place and so much more.

Recommended Titles:

Secrets and Shadows by Bryan Chick

The Secret Lake by Karen Inglis

The Mysterious Benedict Society by Trenton Lee Stewart

The Tale of Despereaux by Kate DiCamillo

The One and Only Ivan by Katherine Applegate