



"A" Is for the Alchemist: A Winnie and Winslow Adventure

James Larson

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Fun characters make for an action-packed novel that is impossible to predict.

In *"A" Is for the Alchemist*, James Larson has written a wild adventure that defies prediction. Children and young adults will enjoy the well-written characters and numerous zany inventions.

Winnie Talisman has built a robot that can sing any music, no matter how complicated. But while Winnie's older brother, Winslow, is helping her with the robot, a flock of angry pigeons steals it. At the same time, evil Dr. Lodestone realizes that the robot is key to making his machine, which turns base metal to gold, finally work. With the help of a homeless dog named Amulet and Winnie's cat, Cavalcade, the race is on to retrieve the robot.

Larson's characters are refreshingly imperfect. Winslow is a second-string football player who struggles to memorize an important play. Winnie has the remarkable ability to build robots and write applications, but she unreasonably blames her brother for permitting her robot to be stolen. Even Cavalcade unfairly taunts Amulet about his supposed cowardice for failing to thwart his brother's kidnapping years earlier. These flaws make the characters realistic and their interactions relatable.

Larson also includes something to spark almost any reader's interest. In less than three hundred pages, the author incorporates such diverse elements as a mysterious castle-like house, ominous fog-like beings, sheet music with swirling notes, a computer tablet with astounding applications, two starving rats, a flock of buzz-saw-like birds, and a mysterious superhero. This level of exciting, imaginative detail makes for an action-packed novel that will keep readers guessing.

Larson's fast-paced, fantastic book also manages to address the important themes of failure and cowardice. Winslow fails his football team at a crucial moment but ultimately saves the day. Likewise, Amulet, who lives for years believing that his cowardice doomed his beloved brother to a terrible fate, becomes a hero. At the same time, Cavalcade, who repeatedly calls Amulet a coward, learns what it feels like to be afraid. Even Dr. Lodestone's twisted nature stems in part from his fear of failure.

The story also contains significant implied violence and death. Early in the book, Amulet relives how he watched as his brother was kidnapped by people who force dogs to fight. A minor character is killed by Dr. Lodestone's flying buzz-saw-like birds. For readers sensitive to these issues, this book may not be a good choice.

"A" Is for the Alchemist is a promising start to Larson's new series, which will appeal to children and young adults seeking an action-packed novel with some fantastic twists.

ANNIE PETERS (July 17, 2014)

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