Billy Johnson and His Duck Are Explorers

Mathew New
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In Mathew New's absurdist graphic novel, a teenage boy and his talking duck seek out adventure in an attempt to prove the boy's worth as an explorer.

Billy, a part-time janitor, is really an explorer. With Barrace, a duck who is also a professor of linguistics, Billy travels the world seeking strange places and artifacts. In this collection of four stories, the duo searches a mysterious jungle for a lost monkey kingdom, hunts beneath a castle in England for the ring of the ghost king, tracks a mythical Atlas Bear through a desert, and goes through a series of trials to obtain powerful hero's armor.

Each story is irreverent, funny, and unpredictable. The stories are tied together by Billy's quest to join the Explorer's League, an elite group of which his parents, now missing, were important members. His desire to follow in their footsteps, and Barrace's support of this plan, results in emotional depth and fosters a sense of innocence that's suitable for all ages. A mysterious blue figure appears just in time to pull Billy and Barrace out of the direst of circumstances in each story, while an unnamed character seems to be tracking them through their adventures. These intriguing elements make it clear that there are more adventures to come.

The book's full-color cartoon illustrations match the playful tone and style of the stories, resulting in a clear sense of space and movement. Onomatopoeia is used to great effect, with flare guns that "tsssssew," swords that "shing" and locks that "klunk," adding enjoyable dimension to the stories.

Billy Johnson and His Duck Are Explorers is a humorous graphic novel full of action and adventure.

CATHERINE THURESON (July / August 2020)

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