

Connie Cobbler: Toy Detective

James DeSalvo

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Author James DeSalvo has penned an engaging mystery for young adults in his intelligent and humorous new work *Connie Cobbler: Toy Detective*. The titular sleuth is a private eye and a soft toy doll, who has retreated from the limelight of her successful television acting career after a tragedy on the set. Connie and her amusing cast of characters are reminiscent of Strawberry Shortcake, that 1980s dessert-themed doll and her gaggle of friends. In Connie's case, she is friends with an assortment of Pastry Pals, including Tiffany Tart, Priscilla Pie, Debbie Danish and Tracy Turnover.

The book is written in the first person, with Connie's noir-esque monologue providing yuks from her snarky mental ruminations. DeSalvo keeps up a tight pace as his sleuth unravels various crimes in Toy Town. The opening chapter immediately romps forward with a visit from Brenda Bombshell (think Barbie doll) to Connie's detective agency. Brenda's dog Foo-Foo and his diamond collar are missing, and Connie quickly solves this case while uncovering clues about the bigger mystery of her TV past.

Connie may be a stuffed doll with a soft heart, but she's also a hard-nosed detective who drowns her sorrows in root beer and isn't afraid to rearrange the blocks of any LEGO-constructed tough who obstructs her. The book is also populated with a tough-talking teddy bear police chief named Captain Cuddles, a department store manager and over-stuffed elephant toy named Mr. Bobo, and a snooty clown doll jeweler named Bubbles. By employing these kinds of incongruities to effectively deflate pompous and officious characters, DeSalvo is able to reach out to older readers, like parents and teachers, who may want to share the book with their kids.

Unfortunately this successful combination of humor and vivid imagery gets bogged down (in a Custard River, no less) during the last third of the book when a tangle of plot lines and overwrought dialogue takes over. This is a mystery, after all, but the light tone and frolic of the first parts of the book are largely replaced with clunky action scenes and dialogue. The hurried change of tone from playful to menacing is confusing and seems to cleave the book into two parts: one, a frothy, toy-filled comic mystery, and the other, a muddled script from a violent cartoon.

Connie Cobbler: Toy Detective has great potential for a continuing series if the author sticks to the successful style of the first two-thirds of this book. The book works when he keeps things light, funny and full of goofy toy characters that his heroine can deflate with her interior monologue. Despite its challenging denouement, this book is recommended as a good selection for readers in grades 4-8 who enjoy a good mystery with interesting characters and a bit of humor on the side.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (June 27, 2011)

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