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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Heist School Freshmen

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The author has crafted realistic teenagers with a good blend of humor and honesty.

Heist School Freshmen is an entertaining story about an adolescent boy searching for a lost treasure. As he recruits friends and classmates to help him in his search, he learns about responsibility, friendship, and what is really important in life. Though the treasure he seeks is a monetary one, what he ends up finding is much more valuable.

Angelo doesn't have a lot going for him. He gets dumped by his girlfriend just before the start of freshman year, his family does not have any money, and he only has a couple friends. While looking for a bathroom at a football game, he overhears two local thugs searching for something behind the old school building. He connects this odd occurrence with a phone he found in his locker, which once belonged to the drug dealer the thugs worked for. With a little sleuthing, Angelo and his friends figure out there is a large sum of money hidden somewhere behind the old school building, and they are determined to find it first.

Angelo is a compelling and relatable character. He is awkward and unsure of himself and wants to find his place in the difficult social world of high school. His friends, Lionel and Drew, are interesting as well. Lionel is the somewhat neglected son of a wealthy businessman and Drew lives with an abusive stepfather. All three boys have problems and dreams that are very true to what many kids experience—loneliness, insecurity, parental and peer pressure, coupled with a desire to be popular, and maybe even exceptional. The author writes about all of this with a good blend of humor and honesty. The story is well crafted: the plot flows smoothly from one point to the next, the slang-infused dialogue is realistic, and the actions the characters take are natural within the context of the plot.

The book is written in Angelo's first-person perspective, which allows the author to provide insight into even the most embarrassing thoughts and feelings found in the mind of a teenage boy. This makes both the character and the story feel authentic and also provides for several laugh-out-loud moments. For instance, Angelo is concerned about the SATs and works to expand his vocabulary. Footnotes include Angelo's definitions of difficult words, for example: "Copse: what you call 'the woods,' if you are a pretty Elf princess, or when it's haunted by a ghost from the Revolutionary War, possibly Johnny Tremain's disembodied metal hand."

Many missing or incorrectly used words are found throughout the book. For instance: "Lionel was a lot better at keeping the frustration of out his voice around his parents that I was."

Heist School Freshmen is a pleasure to read. Some crude language and mild sexual content mean the book may not be appropriate for young readers, but most kids ages twelve to fifteen will find something here to enjoy. The final chapter of the book opens the door for more possible adventures for Angelo and his friends. As the last page concludes, it is with hope that the author has more in store for his characters in the future.

CATHERINE THURESON (February 3, 2014)

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