



The Dirt Bike Detective

Douglas L. Hoover

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This young adult mystery features fast-paced action, a complex maze of clues, and high stakes, all leading to a satisfying, cinematographic climax.

Mystery surrounds Raven Ridge Academy, and while legends of ghostly hauntings abound, bullies are a more immediate problem for twelve-year-old Oliver. But in Douglas L. Hoover's fast-paced and exciting *Dirt Bike Detective*, the arrival of a skinny new kid on a beat-up dirt bike is about to change everything.

It's the first day of school, and trouble is brewing. Oliver, already feeling "like the last piece of pizza left in the box," is being picked on because of the large birthmark on his face. Even worse, he's brought his great-grandfather's pocket watch to school, and if the bullies get it, he's done for.

But the new kid, Chase, who calls himself a detective specializing in the paranormal, isn't afraid of bullies—or of the teacher who confiscates Oliver's watch. A story that begins with the attempt to get the watch back quickly turns into a tale of ghostly encounters, vandalism, and the mysterious disappearance of a teacher, all giving Oliver, Chase, and their small group of friends the idea that something serious, and probably paranormal, is going on. The fact that the president of the United States will soon visit the school to honor the winner of an essay contest adds to the urgency of solving the multiple mysteries.

Written in Oliver's voice, the fun, conversational narrative provides insight into the viewpoints and perspectives of the age group. The tension in the tale is nicely balanced with humor. Hoover keeps the interest level high by providing lots of intriguing clues, then showing how the kids use their imaginations and creativity to follow them. The protagonists are well-rounded, sympathetic, and very likable, and the contrast between them and the evildoers is vivid and believable. Occasional errors in grammar and syntax are somewhat distracting.

On the cusp of their teen years, some of the protagonists still believe in ghosts, zombies, and alien abductions, while others are practical to a fault. Hoover effectively shows how a person's beliefs can color an investigation, and how those who hold different views can pool their knowledge, skills, and strengths to come to the right conclusions. Especially notable is the fact that characters with disabilities are honored for their contributions.

Mature topics are briefly and sensitively touched upon. Oliver worries about his hard-drinking, overworked mother; characters express concern for the environment; and opposing political views turn coworkers, neighbors, and communities into enemies. There are also moments of tenderness, as when Oliver and the essay winner, Ana, are paired to draw each other's portrait in art class. While Oliver puts all his negative feelings about Ana into his drawing, Ana's portrait shows him as he'd like to be seen: without the large birthmark that disfigures his face.

Douglas L. Hoover's *Dirt Bike Detective* offers fast-paced action, a complex maze of clues, and high stakes, leading to a satisfying, cinematographic climax as evildoers meet their nemeses in this small group of children with big hearts, courage, and amazing detective skills.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September 20, 2016)

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