

The Grove

Robert Percy

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The Grove is an entertaining middle grade mystery set in an era of adolescent freedom.

Robert John Percy's middle grade mystery novel *The Grove* is full of friendship and adventure, capturing a period when preteens had free rein in their free time.

Among the orange groves of 1960s Southern California, Chipper Murphy struggles with his mother's alcohol consumption and the fact that his two best friends, Doog and Craig, seem to prefer each other over him. Still, he is a satisfied, adventurous preteen who has just finished sixth grade and is ready for the summer. He's thrilled to be part of a treehouse building project in Mr. Ramos's nearby orange grove—provided that no one catches him, Doog, and Craig building it or spending time in it. The mystery comes in via a figure they see skulking around the orange groves at night, as well as through the danger of a rash of home invasions in the nearby neighborhoods. These elements force Chipper to make new friends, participate in daring journeys, and ultimately take responsibility for what he thinks is right.

In this complex, page-turning mystery, the clues are enticing but not obvious. With a variety of potential suspects, from bullies down the street to the rumored "Dirty Charlie" who wanders the groves at night, no one is quite sure who is involved in the robberies until the very end of the story. The conclusion wraps up all of the unresolved clues with a satisfying reveal and a return to normalcy.

The characters—especially Chipper—are engaging, logical problem-solvers. Their appeal substantially increases the stakes as the mystery unfolds. Plot twists abound, and the short chapters move at a quick clip. Changes in perspective, as when the viewpoint of the robber is strategically inserted before he is identified, make for surprising and helpful additional clues that keep the reader one step ahead of the sleuths. Conversations are made up of short, staccato statements that rarely convey as much emotion as Chipper's deep inner monologue.

Styled for its audience, the peril in the story is thrilling without edging into violence or gore. Children may find it surprising that the characters are so unsupervised, but the story is historically accurate to middle-class suburban Southern California in the 1960s. Aspects of the story seem almost nostalgic for the simple fun of that time period, including exploring and building treehouses.

The Grove is an entertaining middle grade mystery with intriguing coming-of-age elements, set in an era of adolescent freedom.

LAURA LEAVITT (January 21, 2019)

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