

The Math Kids: An Incorrect Solution

David Cole

Shannon O'Toole, Illustrator

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David Cole's tale demonstrates how fun math can actually be.

The Math Kids: An Incorrect Solution, the fifth book in David Cole's middle grade mystery series, finds four math sleuths enter fifth grade and encounter fresh challenges in the form of school bullies and adults who couldn't care less about math.

Jordan, Justin, Stephanie, and Catherine are the Math Kids, who use their skills with numbers to foil burglars and rescue kidnap victims. In this series entry, they tackle problems that are far more familiar to the average student, such as trying to fit in and enduring strict teachers. When Jordan and Justin end up with the grumpy, decidedly anti-math Mr. Miller as their teacher, they take it upon themselves to launch "Operation M and M"—a secret plan to convince their instructor that math is a worthy, useful subject. In the process, they uncover a sobering case of child abuse, as well as a possibly rigged criminal case in which Mr. Miller's nephew has been accused of speeding. Meanwhile, Stephanie and Catherine have been split off into a class of their own; they adjust to new faces, including a rowdy fellow student who delights in tormenting them.

Proceeding at a peppy pace, *Math Kids: An Incorrect Solution* integrates plenty of math puzzles and knowledge into its story, such as an explanation of the possible outcomes of the Prisoner's Dilemma and the lattice method of multiplication. In lesser hands the mix of mystery and math could be jarring, but *An Incorrect Solution* is effective at blending both, thanks to its easygoing prose and dry sense of humor.

The main characters are drawn with likable quirks and foibles. They may be math savants, but they also have relatable issues, whether it's being less than successful at kicking a soccer ball or having to face one's parents after receiving a bad grade. Even the ostensible "bad guys" in the story are revealed to have human sides: Justin and Jordan eventually assist a bully who's been mistreated by his father, a subplot that is handled in sensitive, understated fashion.

While the stakes in *An Incorrect Solution* might be a bit lower than in previous Math Kids books, the story is engrossing throughout. The text is buoyed by Shannon O'Toole's charming illustrations and, as with the other Math Kids books, the math problems the quartet grapple with are worthy puzzlers that provide both mental exercise and enjoyment. Much like the kids win over Mr. Miller, Cole's tale demonstrates how fun math can actually be, with an informative appendix that supplies more detail about some of the math covered in the story.

The Math Kids: An Incorrect Solution is a breezy, enjoyable middle grade mystery that pulls off the difficult feat of being both educational and entertaining.

HO LIN (August 24, 2021)

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