

The Math Kids: An Artificial Test

David Cole

Shannon O'Toole

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The Math Kids: An Artificial Test is a surprisingly topical and worthy addition to the series, providing gripping suspense as well as brain-puzzling fun.

David Cole's Math Kids series has taken its youthful heroes into many a sticky situation, but *The Math Kids: An Artificial Test*, their eighth adventure, injects added international flavor. Here, the mathematically inclined sleuths tour England, only to find themselves embroiled in a potential terrorist plot.

In gratitude for the Math Kids' assistance on a previous case, millionaire Willard Howell treats them to a trip to London. But when cryptic messages and bomb scares set the city on edge, it's up to Catherine, Stephanie, Jordan, and Justin to discover the truth and foil the wrongdoers. They have assistance from a helpful British policeman and a capable MI-6 agent.

As with the other Math Kids books, the story is peppered with delightful brainteasers that invite readers to come up with the solutions before the book's heroes do. In keeping with the presence of coded messages and double agents, the conundrums this time are focused more on logical reasoning than mathematical wizardry. The narrative also leaves plenty of room for educational visits to iconic locations including Stonehenge, Bletchley Park (the headquarters of the famed Bletchley codebreakers of World War II), Westminster Abbey, and the Tower of London.

With the threat of mass bombings hanging over the story, *An Artificial Test* has a more sober tone, with less reliance on the winning characterizations that distinguished earlier installments in the series. Nevertheless, Cole maintains a light touch with his characterizations, even as he ushers the plot forward at a brisk pace. The story's humorous grace notes help to relieve the tension, as when the children struggle with English idioms like "crisps" and "bobbies." A humorous incident at passport control leaves Justin flustered; he puts his foot in his mouth several times. And Jordan's never-ending obsession with food, especially ice cream, comes to the fore. Elsewhere, the children muse on machine learning and ponder the true meaning of the stones at Stonehenge.

An Artificial Test includes plenty of surprises. Red herrings and false leads proliferate, and what seem to be random attacks of terror are not what they appear to be. Keeping events within the bounds of reality, Cole engineers an exciting finale as the children race against the clock to prevent a major crime. This is topped off with an eerie subterranean climax in which smarts and practicality win the day. Adding to the story's atmosphere are Shannon O'Toole's illustrations, which take full advantage of the English sights with their cinematic panoramas, including a loving, detailed depiction of the Crown Jewels.

Capped with an appendix that further explains its puzzles as well as the famous English sites visited in the course of the story, *The Math Kids: An Artificial Test* is a surprisingly topical and worthy addition to the series, providing gripping suspense as well as brain-puzzling fun.

HO LIN (June 2, 2023)

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