

## The Math Kids: An Encrypted Clue

**David Cole**

**Shannon O'Toole, Illustrator**

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*In the entertaining middle grade mystery novel *An Encrypted Clue*, teamwork, brainwork, and generosity of spirit are fundamental to the solutions of more than just math problems.*

In David Cole's chapter book *An Encrypted Clue*, a group of clever fourth graders work to uncover a buried treasure and save their town from financial ruin.

Stephanie, Justin, Jordan, and Catherine are the members of the Math Kids, McNair Elementary School's fourth grade math club. While researching the history of their town, Stephanie discovers a cipher written on a page of *A Short History of Maynard*. She brings the cipher to her fellow Math Kids; together, they crack the code and discover a cryptic message that seems to point to a treasure hidden in an abandoned coal mine. The mine was once run by the Maynards, the founders of the town.

When the Math Kids find out that the town is experiencing a severe budget shortfall, and their much-anticipated district math contest may be cut, they redouble their efforts to find the treasure. Cliffhangers come at the end of each chapter, forcing the Math Kids to face new obstacles. Some of these hurdles are contrived; still, there are ample clues that help when it comes to predicting the outcomes and conclusions of the Kids' investigation. As they get close to the truth, they face a frightening confrontation with the last living member of the Maynard family, but they approach him with ingenuity and empathy.

Its prose straightforward, the book makes math seem exciting, accessible, and fulfilling. The diverse Math Kids are curious and engaged with the world around them. Each has a strength that the others recognize and appreciate. A clear sense that collaboration and cooperation result in success arises as the team uses their brains to decipher and decode. Further, math problems are scattered throughout the book, and the team discusses the best way to reach their solutions. The solutions are not provided in the chapters themselves; instead, the audience is invited to work out the problems along with the Math Kids, and step-by-step solutions are reserved for the book's appendix.

The book's whimsical, black-and-white line illustrations have a benign Gothic sensibility that help to enhance the story's ominous, but light, atmosphere. The Math Kids are shown wearing their favorite t-shirts, with accessories like overstuffed backpacks that reveal their idiosyncrasies. A few of their behaviors seem unlikely for their ages, though: Jordan, for example, identifies a piano in the Maynard House Museum as a Fazioli Brunei, which is an esoteric detail for a ten-year-old who has not been tagged as a music prodigy to know. Additionally, a neglected heroine of code-breaking history is identified sans her last name.

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RANDI HACKER (April 16, 2021)

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