

The Mystery of the Mighty Mississippi

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Many young students are well acquainted with the mighty river that divides this continent into East and West. The Mississippi River itself offers geography, history, literature, folklore, and mystery. This novel presents fictional excitement and educational fun in the story of young Christina and her brother, Grant, on summer vacation with their grandparents, Papa and Mimi. They begin their trip north on the river from New Orleans, planning to join up with friends who are traveling simultaneously from the source of the river in Minnesota. The two families are to meet in St. Louis, Missouri, where Mimi has been invited to present a speech.

Mystery enters the story in the form of a red rose. At a sidewalk café in New Orleans, a wandering mime leaves a red rose in Christina's hair. She finds another rose when she is briefly gone astray in an aboveground cemetery. A third is found on her plate in the grand dining room aboard the *Delta Queen* headed for St. Louis. The significance of the roses is revealed when a young male journalist seeking to make a name for himself—the mime out of costume—delivers Mimi's stolen speech.

The story is not only fun to read, but it overflows with interesting facts. Readers learn how the French and Canadians settled in New Orleans and their descendants became known as Cajuns, and that the cemeteries are above ground because the city is below sea level. There is also a description of how the Mighty Mississippi was home to Mark Twain (and thus Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn) and how it begins in Northern Minnesota as a small creek that a child can jump over.

As a young mother in 1979, the author founded her own publishing company, specializing in books for children that supplement their classroom learning, along with educational materials for teachers. *Publisher's Weekly* has called Gallopade "the fastest-growing small publisher." Marsh's mystery series and "State Stuff" books (about all fifty states and Washington, D.C.) both have received the Teacher's Choice Award from *Learning Magazine*.

This title is number fourteen in the mystery series for readers aged eight to eleven. Photographs of the children add little to the story, but the map of the Mississippi River is instructive. Supplemental material at the back of the book informs readers about the author, provides a glossary, lists a scavenger hunt (to find facts in the text), gives hints for writing a mystery story, and includes a form that children can mail in for a chance to be a character in an upcoming book. Teaching guides are available separately for each series title, making these books excellent choices for supplementary reading in the upper elementary classroom.

LINDA COOLEY (September / October 2004)

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