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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ JUVENILE FICTION

The Official Librarian

Nathan Miller
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As the official librarian at Ballonsboro High School, Bessy Beebody, star of The Official Librarian: Bessy's Back, has almost too much to deal with. Determined to be the best librarian ever, Bessy runs into trouble on her first day of work. Not only do various obstacles thwart her timely, presentable arrival, but worst of all, the first edition of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, which was on display in the school library, has been stolen.

Of course, Bessy must solve the mystery of the missing book, all the while dealing with forces that seem determined to hold her back. There's a nasty teacher, a wild bird, and a gorilla on the loose. With the help of her peculiarly named student aide, Idunno, Bessy braves all perils and saves the day.

Nathan Miller writes with sprightly energy, engaging readers instantly in Bessy's plight. Her silly adventures are exaggerated versions of problems that people experience every day—accidentally spraying oneself with bug spray, getting locked out of one's car, being slobbered on by an overly friendly dog—but poor Bessy experiences them to the worst degree, making her a sympathetic character. Miller's sense of humor likes messes and mischief and is sure to appeal to young readers.

Georgia Rice's illustrations, done in a cartoony style, complement Miller's words. The characters have googly eyes and big smirks. Bessy, often the victim of some disaster, has profuse stains and "smell lines" coming out of her clothes. The illustrations will probably cause as much amusement as the text.

A few improvements should be made to The Official Librarian. For one thing, Miller tends to overwrite, never using one adjective when he can use three. Additionally, minor dramas, such as an upset stomach, can take up to a page of excess detail.

Additionally, there's the question of audience. With its silly names and constant slapstick, the book appears to be aimed at very young readers under eight. A scavenger hunt at the end of the book, however, covers literary devices (such as foreshadowing and alliteration), as well as persuasive writing. These topics are usually not taught until around fifth grade. There is a disconnect between the expected and actual audience.

The Official Librarian: Bessy's Back is a slight, funny mystery, well-written but overdone. It can be enjoyed by kids from six to ten.

ELIZABETH A. ALLEN (July 1, 2010)

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