

The Rock Holler Gang: Junior Detectives: Mystery of the Cornerstone

O.K. Rhodes

(August 2003)

(135pp)

978-0-9740799-0-5

Take one ten-year-old budding detective with an inquiring mind and place her in a small town with secrets to spare and you have a mystery story appropriate for elementary— and middle-school—aged children.

A year after her mother dies, Randi Rhodes's father—a mystery writer—decides to move from New York City to the small town of Deer Creek, Tennessee, where the family used to spend their summers in the mountains. Though initially anxious about being bored, Randi soon teams up with a friend and sidekick, D.C., whose cautious nature balances Randi's own enthusiasm and tenacity.

A lost cat and a missing historical artifact send the duo on a detective hunt that threatens to overturn the town and its inhabitants. Inspired by her father's stories, Randi and D.C. fancy themselves "Junior Detectives"—until their investigation leads them to a life-threatening situation that requires the townspeople to rally together and come clean about their pasts, for better and worse.

Younger readers, particularly girls, will appreciate Randi's spunk and energy. The emotional undercurrents to the book—Randi and her father are adjusting to life without her mother—are genuine without being overly sentimental. The addition of a Spanish-speaking housekeeper to the cast of characters adds a multicultural flavor that also does not seem forced.

The author grew up in the South and studied English and Theatre Arts at Auburn University and University of Tennessee. This is her first novel, and it begins a planned series "designed to encourage and enthrall young readers while promoting multiculturalism, adventure, and education," according to the founders of Maple Bend Farms Press.

At the end of the book, Rhodes includes activities that readers can try with their parents. Like Randi, aspiring Sherlocks will learn how to collect a dusty footprint from the scene of a crime, or make the town mayor's special taffy. *The Mystery of the Cornerstone*, with its engaging plotline and dynamic characters, will certainly leave young readers with a thirst to revisit Randi, D.C., and the town of Deer Creek.

JOHANNA MASSÉ (March / April 2004)

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