



Dirty Dozen, The; Mad Iris Goes Missing; Sammy and the Starman; Wildly Weird

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BfK Rating:

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These four titles are aimed at 8-12 year-olds with a reading age of 8+. In a shorter novel it's a challenge to create memorable characters. In *Wildly Weird* the Weird family stand on a fringe between the unbelievable and fantastic stuff of story. Umansky niftily places Ott Weird within friendship range of a kid whose parents are very straight-laced and tidy, keeping the wilder excesses of the rest of the clan for later encounters in the book. It's a clever bridge across a culture clash that ends up being moulded into some excellent, characterful dialogue, with Ott guiding us through the experience of the family's involvement in a plant competition. The story is short and funny, and its momentum keeps our interest right up to a comic twist that makes the final chapters even more weird.

The plot of *Mad Iris Goes Missing* is simple, really! School has ostrich. Rival school kidnaps it. Brave kid saves ostrich. Ostrich wins football match. I mean, where do these ideas come from? Once again, Jeremy Strong takes the weirdest story and tells it in a matter-of-fact manner that made me wonder if my school should also have a large ostrich. This is a very funny story with some sparky set pieces. The scene where the Headteacher is trying to conduct a clandestine conversation denying all culpability in the kidnap, while the ostrich attacks the telephone (Iris has a thing about telephones) is a pleasure to read aloud? I was laughing as I read it. The rescue, the budding Key Stage 2 romance and the final football game are all ingredients that make for a great tale. For a short novel it also has the added benefit of being packed with clearly demarcated episodes, making it very accessible to the child tackling this sort of read for the first time.

Footie stories can be a real drag, over-burdened with match details and predictable underdog triumphs but form an orderly queue of the book-repellent lads who will actually read *The Dirty Dozen* from cover to cover. While this is yet

another underdog triumph, its focus on the one match and the various tensions at half time and on the touchline sustain the reader's support. The themes are pitched in a way that will engage the full junior age range. There are older brothers fancying girls and players getting nutmegged and, while I find the council estate versus posh kids slant of the football tournament a hackneyed theme too far, the unprepared nature of the underdogs and the way they face the crucial weakness of the posh team and its overbearing striker make for an interesting game. With its dependence on the conduct and outcome of one particular game, this is not a story for the non-footballer, but with its use of the terminology of the match, as teams 'keep shape' and 'chase players home?', it has the ingredients to appeal to a group of kids that need a book like this. The queue is forming even as I write...

In *Sammy and the Starman* Sammy the geek finds Jax, an alien, and rescues him from Dennis, the bully, and the story unfolds with pace and humour. At 84 pages, Cassidy's book pitches itself at the child who isn't yet up to a novel, but wants a longer read than a picture book. The difficult task, accomplished by Jan Mark in her classic story *The Snow Maze* or Florence Parry Heide in *The Shrinking of Treehorn*, is to add that something extra to the story, making it more than just a plot with pace. The added dimension to this book is the awesome wonder of space. Cassidy appeals to the fascination children have as they begin to discover the realities behind the night's sky, opening this dimension within a fun story. Jax, the alien, avoids being an ET clone, bringing his own chatty vocabulary to the friendship he forms with Sammy, and the ongoing bullying threat provides a pairing of science fiction with down-to-earth problems. The two come together in a final disclosure that provides an entertaining twist to the whole story. HTh

Running Order:

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