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See You in the Cosmos, Carl Sagan

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

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4

This story is told in the voice of eleven-year-old Alex, whose particular hero is the late, popularising astronomer of the title. It consists of a series of audio recordings he makes for the benefit of life forms out there in the cosmos. Alex's intention is to put all these on to a Golden iPod which he will then launch via a home-made rocket. And if this sounds like a tall order, it is, with his final attempt to send his iPod into space a dismal failure. But on the other hand, he has now managed to get miles away from his catatonic mother, with who he lives miserably alone after the death of an absentee father. He is also currently looked after by the new adult friends he has made on his journey to the rocket site set aside for amateur enthusiasts of space travel from America and beyond.

How Alex manages all this is made believable because of his infectious powers of ingenuous charm. Those who take up with him never seem to realise they are running a considerable risk, given that any new adult relationship with an eleven-year-old child travelling without permission away from home could raise considerable suspicion. But as a juvenile character Alex dates back to a previous fictional world where the potential kindness of strangers always outweighs more contemporary suspicions about motives and behaviour. He also eventually tracks down a neglectful older brother plus a previously unknown half-sister, so to an extent keeping his new itinerant life more safely within family bounds. A final return home goes well enough, although his mother remains mentally ill for the foreseeable future.

Jack Cheng tells his story artfully enough, veering away from sentimentality though often only at the last minute. Funny, moving and sharp-witted, there is much to enjoy here for readers of the same age as Alex and indeed older.

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