



Curiosity

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Intrigue, danger, chess, and a real-life hoax combine in this historical novel from the author of *The Shakespeare Stealer*

Philadelphia, PA, 1835. Rufus, a twelve-year-old chess prodigy, is recruited by a shady showman named Maelzel to secretly operate a mechanical chess player called the Turk. The Turk wows ticket-paying audience members and players, who do not realize that Rufus, the true chess master, is hidden inside the contraption. But Rufus's job working the automaton must be kept secret, and he fears he may never be able to escape his unscrupulous master. And what has happened to the previous operators of the Turk, who seem to disappear as soon as Maelzel no longer needs them? Creeping suspense, plenty of mystery, and cameos from Edgar Allan Poe and P. T. Barnum mark Gary Blackwood's triumphant return to middle grade fiction.

Curiosity Details

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Author : Gary L. Blackwood

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From Reader Review Curiosity for online ebook

Sugarr says

This was ok , I was expecting a bit more adventure or more mystery, there were times when the book just dragged on and on. I did like the incorporation of real life people into this fictional story. That was pretty original to me. I just wish this book was more exiting .

Eye of Sauron says

For a middle grade novel, this is delightfully well done. The chess bits are fascinating in a vague enough way for a non-chess player to enjoy, and the characterization and incorporation of the historical period (and roles from real-life people from the time) are admirable. Poe and Barnum make appearances, not to mention other less famous members of their era. There is a bit more complexity here than I was expecting, and the dreaded **Middle-Grade Novel Ending**TM didn't make an appearance, which I appreciated.

This would have been a relaxed four stars except for one seemingly minor but actually EGREGIOUS mistake; I can hardly believe it's a mistake because it's so glaringly obvious, but I did some research and I don't think the author is making an obscure point here. The Quakers in charge of the boarding house are supposed to talk archaically, right? (ignore the slight offense here) Here are a couple quotes:

"So, thee can work with thy hands? Good, good."

"How long did thee work for Mr. Maelzel?"

"Thee was in the House of Refuge when he took..."

Anyone notice what these three quotes have in common? **A terrible misuseage of the archaic pronoun *thee*.** In all of these cases, *thee* should CLEARLY be replaced with *thou*, the subject form of the pronoun. See, that sounds pedantic, but this is really a shocking mistake from an otherwise very competent writer.

Overall, nice way to spend a couple hours but lacking any real purpose.

Jeb Brown says

This book was very interesting. The storyline was good, and very suspenseful/thrilling. It did get a little weird at the end, but still a good book.

Janet Hutchinson says

I found this to be a rather complex book - well constructed and well written. I'm just not sure of its appeal to middle school students. Not that they wouldn't enjoy it - I'm just not sure they would pick it up.

Rebecca says

One of several new chess-related fiction books out lately. Squee! Danger! Intrigue! Automatons! CHESS!

Tami says

I was ecstatic to see a new novel from Gary Blackwood! And (for the most part) I was not disappointed.

Curiosity is the story of Rufus, a twelve-year-old born with a curvature of the spine and an inborn ability to play chess. Rufus lives in early 18th Century America. His mother died giving birth to him and he has been raised in the parsonage, where his father is employed as the Parson. He has a nanny, a large home, plenty to eat and as such is mostly sheltered from the unkindness of those who would mock or be appalled by his physical appearance and struggle.

Rufus' entire life is upended when it becomes evident that his father has unwisely invested his money and neglected his Parson's duties, resulting in the loss of his job--and with it the only home Rufus has ever known. Penniless and in debt, Rufus' father is thrown into Debtors' Prison and Rufus is ultimately placed in a boys' home that is little better than a prison, itself.

Here Rufus' story merges with historical figures when he is taken from the Home by a man who has seen Rufus play chess at the local Chess Club and defeat grown men who consider themselves exceptionally skilled players. Rufus finds himself living with the Curiosity Showman and Master of Mechanical Wonders Johann Maelzel, owner of The Turk, a mechanical, chess-playing marvel. The secret of the Turk, of course, is the person inside its hidden cabinet playing the actual chess game. Rufus becomes that person.

Maelzel is a brutal master, as is his engineer, Jacques (at first). Rufus' character remains genuine throughout the book. He grows from a meek child into a young man who realizes he is allowed to choose which circumstances of his life he will accept with grace and which he will challenge for the sake of his own self-worth.

Blackwood is a master of historical fiction, able to weave a story with intriguing characters and engaging storylines that are the true definition of "page-turners!" I was a little dissatisfied with the ending of *Curiosity*. It felt a little abrupt to me--especially given that the rest of the book is extraordinarily well done in both character and plot. It is not enough however to take away from the way *Curiosity* makes 19th Century America and the Curiosity entertainment era come alive in a gripping, thoroughly enjoyable reading experience.

I highly recommend *Curiosity* and Blackwood's other phenomenal historical fiction series: *The Shakespeare Stealer*--one of my all-time favorites!

Gillie says

Such an intriguing book!

Steven Raszewski says

Excellent book! Chess theme, historical fiction, period piece, gripping good story written in a crisp first person narrative (which is hard to do), what's not to like. Great read.

Ms. Yingling says

In middle grade fiction, life can always get worse. That's what Rufus Goodspeed finds out when his failed naturalist/ minister father loses his job, and the two have to move into a small flat in 1835 Philadelphia. Soon after, not only is his father thrown into debtors' prison, but Rufus himself is caught stealing (although he is innocent) and sent to a boys' home. There, his superior chess playing skills comes to the attention of Milhouse and he is offered a job with Maelzel, a showman of curiosities. Among these are the Turk, a chess playing automaton that has gone in and out of fashion. Of course, it doesn't really play chess, and has suffered at the hands of the last person who was forced to sit in the cramped cabinet and play games. Rufus is perfect for this. Crippled because of birth trauma and able to win all chess games he plays, he soon learns how to operate the machine, and is set to work exhibiting its wonders. As with any curiosity, there are skeptics trying to disprove it, and a reported by the name of Edgar Allen Poe tries to figure out the mystery. Maelzel is a cruel task master and cares little for Rufus' well being; Mulhouse is too sunken in his own pain and infirmity to be of much help, and Rufus father never makes it out of debtors' prison alive, but support comes from the mechanic Jacques, who is gruff but devises a brace for Rufus' back, and helps him out in times of travail. Support also comes from an unexpected source when things go South with the Turk. Strengths: Must admit that the length (308 pages) and the bleak topic didn't make me eager to read this book, even though I enjoyed *Around the World in 100 Days*. This did draw me in nicely, and the historical details were brilliant. The suspense of the various plots kept the book moving along, and the characters kept me invested. While this is not for every middle grade reader, I think I will buy a copy for those readers who will pick up historical fiction that is more complex.

Weaknesses: This would have been a tighter book if some of the subplots had been removed-- there was plenty going on without the addition of some threads.

Joy Lane says

I thought it was well written and I will happily recommend it! It uses a wide vocabulary. I think 4th and up who play chess will appreciate it.

AR 6.3 and 11 pts

Lexile 870L

R.K. Cowles says

3 3/4 stars

Betsy says

Blackwood's back, baby! And not a minute too soon. Back in 1998, the author released *The Shakespeare Stealer* which would soon thereafter become his best-known work. A clever blending of historical fiction and adventure, the book allowed teachers the chance to hone Shakespeare down to a kid-friendly level. Since its publication Mr. Blackwood has kept busy, writing speculative fiction and, most recently, works of nonfiction for kids. Then there was a bit of a lull in his writing and the foolish amongst us (myself included) forgot about him. There will be no forgetting Mr. Blackwood anytime now though. Not after you read his latest work *Curiosity*. Throwing in everything from P.T. Barnum and phrenology to hunchbacks, Edgar Allan Poe, automatons, chess prodigies, murder, terrible fires, and legless men, Blackwood produces a tour de force to be reckoned with. In the press materials for this book, Penguin calls it "Gary Blackwood's triumphant return to middle grade fiction." They're not wrong. The man's about to acquire a whole new generation of fans and enthusiasts.

Fear for the children of novels that describe their childhoods as pampered or coddled. No good can come of that. Born weak with a slight deformity of the spine, Rufus lives a lovely life with his father, a well-respected Methodist minister in early 19th century Philadelphia. That's all before his father writes a kind of predecessor to *Origin of the Species* and through a series of misadventures is thrown into debtor's prison. Fortunately (perhaps) Rufus is a bit of a chess prodigy and his talents get him a job with a man by the name of Johann Nepomuk Maelzel. Maelzel owns an automaton called *The Turk* that is supposed to be able to play chess against anyone and win. With Rufus safely ensconced inside, *The Turk* is poised to become a massive moneymaker. But forces are at work to reveal *The Turk*'s secrets and if that information gets out, Rufus's life might not be worth that of the pawns he plays.

Making the past seem relevant and accessible is hard enough when you're writing a book for adults. Imagine the additional difficulty children's authors find themselves in. Your word count is limited else you lose your audience. That means you need to engage in some serious (not to mention judicious and meticulous) wordplay. Blackwood's a pro, though. His 1835 world is capable of capturing you with its life and vitality without boring you in the process. At one point Rufus describes seeing Richmond, VA for the first time and you are *THERE*, man. From the Flying Gigs to the mockingbirds to the James River itself. I was also relieved to find that Blackwood does make mention of the African-Americans living in Richmond and Philly at the time this novel takes place. Many are the works of historical fiction by white people *about* white people that conveniently forget this little fact.

Add onto that the difficulty that comes with making the past interesting and accurate and relevant all at once. I read more historical fiction for kids than a human being should, and while it's all often very well meaning, interesting? Not usually an option. I'm certain folks will look at how Blackwood piles on the crazy elements here (see: previous statement about the book containing everything from phrenology to P.T. Barnum) and will assume that this is just a cheap play for thrills. Not so. It's the man's writing that actually holds your focus. I mean, look at that first line: "Out of all the books in the world, I wonder what made you choose this

one.” Heck, that’s just a drop in the bucket. Check out these little gems:

“If my cosseted childhood hadn’t taught me how to relate to other people, neither had it taught em to fear them.”

“I was like some perverse species of prisoner who felt free only when he was locked inside a tiny cell.”

“Maelzel was not the sort of creator imagined by the Deists, who fashions a sort of clockwork universe and winds it up, then sits back and watches it go and never interferes. He was more like my father’s idea of the creator: constantly tinkering with his creations, looking for ways to make them run more smoothly and perform more cleverly – the kind who makes it possible for new species to develop.”

As for the writing of the story itself, Blackwood keeps the reader guessing and then fills the tale with loads of historical details. The historical accuracy is such that Blackwood even allows himself little throwaway references, confident that confused kids will look them up themselves. For example, at one point Rufus compares himself to “Varney the Vampire climbing into his coffin.” This would be a penny dreadful that circulated roundabout this time (is there any more terrifying name than “Varney” after all?). In another instance a blazing fire is met with two “rival hose” companies battling one another “for the right to hook up to the nearest fireplug.” There is a feeling that for a book to be literary it has to be dull. Blackwood dispels the notion, and one has to stand amazed when they realize that somehow he managed to make a story about a kid trapped in a small dark space for hours at a time riveting.

Another one of the more remarkable accomplishments of the book is that it honestly makes you want to learn more about the game of chess. A good author can get a kid interested in any subject, of course. I think back on *The Cardturner* by Louis Sachar, which dared to talk up the game of Bridge. And honestly, chess isn’t a hard sell. The #1 nonfiction request I get from my fellow children’s librarians (and the request I simply cannot fulfill fast enough) is for more chess books for kids. At least in the big cities, chess is a way of life for some children. One hopes that we’ll be able to extend their interest beyond the immediate game itself and onto a book where a kid like themselves has all the markings of true genius.

It isn’t perfect, of course. In terms of characterization, of all the people in this book Rufus is perhaps the least interesting. You willingly follow him, of course. Just because he doesn’t sparkle on the page like some of the other characters doesn’t mean you don’t respond to the little guy. One such example might be when his first crush doesn’t go as planned. But he’s a touchstone for the other characters around him. Then there’s the other problem of Rufus being continually rescued by the same person in the same manner (I won’t go into the details) more than once. It makes for a weird repeated beat. The shock of the first incident is actually watered down by the non-surprise of the second. Rufus becomes oddly passive in his own life, rarely doing anything to change the course of his fate (he falls unconscious and wakes up rescued more than once,) a fact that may contribute to the fact that he’s so unmemorable on the page.

But that aside, it’s hard not to be entranced by what Blackwood has come up with here. Automaton sort of came to the public’s attention when Brian Selznick wrote *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. Blackwood takes it all a step further merging man and machine, questioning what we owe to one another and, to a certain extent, where the power really lies. Rufus finds his sense of self and bravery by becoming invisible. At the same time, he’s so innocent to the ways of the world that becoming visible comes with the danger of having your heart broken in a multitude of different ways. In an era where kids spend untold gobs of time in front of the screens of computers, finding themselves through a newer technology, Blackwood’s story has never been timelier. Smart and interesting, fun and strange, this is one piece of little known history worthy of your attention. Check and mate.

For ages 9-12.

Kimberly says

I think this book was highly entertaining. Learning that it was intended to be a historical fiction added to its charm. The research that Blackwood did in writing it was well received by me. My only criticism would be that the ending did lack continuity. Yes, the fact that Rufus started the book by breaking the fourth wall was brought full circle; however, the continuity of story telling fashion lacked something.

Barb Middleton says

This well-crafted book adds depth to the plot with its intricate layering of history and fiction that follows the real life of "The Turk," a chess-playing automaton that came to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1835. The event led to crazy speculations of its inner workings in the media. The author captures the time period of the industrial revolution when children were used for labor and forced to work long hours and odd jobs that fit their size such as cleaning chimneys or as in this story working the mechanisms of a machine in a cramped space. The story is enriched by true historical details such as "Godfrey's Cordial," a mixture of opium and treacle, that was given to children by parents that couldn't afford to miss work because of a sick child. It was one of the many times I found myself researching a topic outside of the story. I also looked up the Battle of Trocadero, phrenology, automatons, certain historical people, and the King's Road. Historical books can't explain everything and Gary Blackwood does a terrific job dropping nuggets left and right that piqued my interest but didn't detract from the plot. Johann Maezel really did bring The Turk to America and references to Edgar Allan Poe, his wife, and P.T. Barnum make for a fun slip into the past. Then there is the chess playing brilliance of twelve-year-old Rufus Goodspeed. I don't even like chess but I felt like an expert experiencing it through his eyes.

Rufus is hired by Johann Maezel when he is spotted for his "freakish" ability at winning chess games. Maezel wants Rufus to run the automaton, The Turk, by stuffing himself in a box below it and operating the mechanisms to play chess with audience members in his show. No one knows a person operates The Turk and Maezel literally keeps Rufus a prisoner in a room because he doesn't want anyone to talk to him and try to pry out The Turk's secrets. Rufus agrees so that he can make money and get his father out of debtor's prison. The first person point of view adds to the claustrophobic feel of Rufus's situation of being in a box and imprisoned not only by Maezel, but others as well. Rufus spends his time with the craftsman and mechanic, Jacques, who repairs The Turk. Jacques is abusive and suffers from post-traumatic stress syndrome after being in Franco-Spanish war. The two develop a tepid relationship where Rufus helps Jacques by getting him to talk and Jacques shows he cares for Rufus in his own way.

While the author's word choices and historical layers soar, the pacing is somewhat slow and dark in the beginning and Rufus is a character that might not appeal to some young readers. Rufus is curious and smart but he is passive and accepting of people that manipulate him. He's not one to take control of his destiny or put up a fight. I liked his dry and subtle sense of humor, but he is victimized much of the time due to a sheltered upbringing, hunched back and weak disposition. Of course he's stuck inside all the time so he is not strong. His slow progression toward standing up for himself is not fully realized as it is someone else that rescues him most of the time in dire situations. I liked it when he finally stands up to Maezel and uses his wits. Shortly after, he plays chess with daring abandonment during one session while operating The Turk. He

moves back to his cautious ways but the incident shows some anger and grief motivating him to take control of his destination even if for a small moment in time. At the end, when he meets his friend that embodies the notion of free choice, I thought, at last, a final adventure will show Rufus finally taking full control of his life and not being a pawn to others. Unfortunately it is a stalemate. While he does progress some and he does show how he transcends his cruel situations, I wanted more at the end. Perhaps you'll feel differently.

The author creates interesting characters. They have distinct traits and unique voices. Maezel is into phrenology, a pseudoscience that determines characteristics of a person based on configurations of his or her skull. Maezel cannot relate to others and is a bully and cruel. He uses phrenology to try and understand people rather than using social norms. It shows how stunted he is in his relationships with others. In contrast, when Rufus decides to learn phrenology, he reads Maezel's book on it out of boredom and uses the knowledge to reveal how he feels about situations. He tries to read the skull of The Turk at one point in a funny, suspenseful scene. Other times he uses phrenology in a self-deprecating manner.

Jacques, as a character, suffers post-traumatic stress syndrome and does not get over it. His abuse turns to protection as he comes to like Rufus in his gruff way. The Turk's called "Otso" by Rufus and represents Jacques friend from the past. The last line is the same words Jacques said to his friend showing how closely machine and human are connected. Jacques also uses The Turk to communicate at the end of the story. Maezel has Jacques in the box telling fortunes for money. The Turk wears a sign saying "Swami" and Rufus calls Jacques a "swami" which means a religious leader that gains mastery over self. In an exchange Rufus learns that Jacques has not gained mastery over his nightmares. It suggests that Jacques cannot he is trying overcome his past but is learning to live with it by becoming The Turk.

Rufus at times can't control The Turk. When he wants to make a move that will allow a player to win, it won't let him. This mystical bend in the story shows how machine and human are interconnected. Rufus and Jacques don't have control of their lives. The end seems to suggest that while Rufus has freed himself from The Turk, Jacques has yet to do so. In the epilogue, The Turk collects dust like a long forgotten relic. I didn't really understand the ending and why Rufus risked his life for it. Maybe it was to show he could finally take action. Or perhaps it is supposed to symbolize the endgame like in chess. Or a stalemate. Or the curtain falling on the last act. I don't know. That's the best I can deduce from it.

Speaking of deduction, Edgar Allan Poe is worked into the plot as a journalist for a magazine where he wants to find out how the Turk works. He's a bit unscrupulous and his accomplice is a character that is a nice mixture of fact and fiction. Another tidbit that sent me hyperlinking through the Web and getting more information on Virginia Clemm. Like I said, I really liked how the author the sprinkled facts and references throughout the plot. Even a character with the name Fisher makes an appearance. It isn't spelled the same but still conjures up an image of chess champion, Bobby Fischer. Readers that liked "The Invention of Hugo Cabret" by Brian Selznick or "The Card Turner" by Louis Sachar should give this a go.

Sam Bragg says

very good book with a very interesting plot
