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Karuna Riaz

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A trio of friends from New York City find themselves trapped inside a mechanical board game that they must dismantle in order to save themselves and generations of other children in this action-packed debut that's a steampunk *Jumanji* with a Middle Eastern flair.

When twelve-year-old Farah and her two best friends get sucked into a mechanical board game called *The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand*—a puzzle game akin to a large Rubik's cube—they know it's up to them to defeat the game's diabolical architect in order to save themselves and those who are trapped inside, including her baby brother Ahmed. But first they have to figure out how.

Under the tutelage of a lizard guide named Henrietta Peel and an aeronaut Vijay, the Farah and her friends battle camel spiders, red scorpions, grease monkeys, and sand cats as they prepare to face off with the maniacal Lord Amari, the man behind the machine. Can they defeat Amari at his own game...or will they, like the children who came before them, become cogs in the machine?

The Gauntlet Details

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From Reader Review The Gauntlet for online ebook

Adam Silvera says

That synopsis tho! I went to go add this to my to-read list but I apparently did that back in February. WELL DONE, PAST ADAM.

Tanja Voosen says

Paheli: Spiel um alles oder nichts ist ein sehr treffender Titel für dieses Kinderbuch. In der Verlagsvorschau wurde es mit „Jumanji“ verglichen und das kann ich genauso unterschreiben. Die Geschichte handelt von der jungen Farah, die an ihrem zwölften Geburtstag mit dem mysteriösen Spiel „Paheli“ in Berührung kommt. Ihr jüngerer Bruder wird prompt wie von Zauberhand in dieses hineingezogen und um ihn zu retten, müssen Farah und ihre Freunde gemeinsam als Team bei „Paheli“ antreten und den sogenannten „Architekten“ des Spiels besiegen – doch der kämpft nicht immer mit fairen Mitteln. Der Klappentext vermittelt genau das, was man bekommt: Eine abenteuerliche Handlung im Rahmen eines Spiels, kindgerecht für die Zielgruppe ab 10 Jahren aufwärts. Sowohl der Plot, als auch die Sprache sind ideal für junge Leser/innen.

Gleich eine Anmerkung vorab: In diesem Buch trägt die Protagonistin einen Hijab, was so viel wie ein Kopftuch ist. Die Familie von Farah ist aus Bangladesch nach Amerika gekommen und es finden sich kleine Details bezüglich dieser fremden Kultur im Roman wieder. Das fand ich absolut wundervoll, denn ich bin der Meinung, dass solche Thematiken öfter ihren Weg in Bücher finden sollten. Die Autorin lebt zwar in New York, aber ihre eigene Familie hat ebenfalls fremdländische Wurzeln. Gerade dadurch wirkt hier alles sehr natürlich eingeflochten und man lernt sogar noch das ein oder andere Wort in einer anderen Sprache dazu oder entdeckt kleine Eigenheiten von Farahs Kultur.

Das Spiel „Paheli“ an sich hat ein Wüsten-Setting, das durch indische und arabische Einflüsse geprägt ist und eine sehr schöne Atmosphäre schafft. Schon beim ersten Betreten davon fand ich die Beschreibungen äußerst gelungen, denn man gewinnt gleich das Gefühl hier eine Menge Abenteuer-Luft zu schnuppern. Das war besonders angesichts der üblichen Schauplätze von Kinderbüchern sehr erfrischend. An sich ist die Geschichte sehr simpel gestrickt: Die Freunde müssen Aufgaben bestehen, um „Paheli“ zu gewinnen – genau wie bei „Jumanji“ gilt es also Grenzen zu überwinden, zusammenzuhalten und bloß nicht zu verlieren. Dabei ist der rote Faden immer schön im Blick und dürfte daher auch kleineren Büchereulen keine Probleme bereiten. Durch den schlichten Schreibstil und die kompakten Dialoge wird das Ziel nie aus den Augen verloren.

Dabei hat die Autorin ihren Figuren trotzdem den ein oder Stolperstein in den Weg gelegt, die vor allem gegen Ende noch einmal für schön Schwung sorgen. Ich persönlich hätte es noch einen Tick spannender gefunden, wenn die Spiele im Roman nicht so „gewöhnlich“ gewesen wären, sondern etwas ganz Eigenes, denn man kennt diese aus der „normalen Welt“ sehr gut. Die Autorin hat jedoch viele originelle Ideen mit in die Handlung eingeflochten, wodurch der Gesamteindruck bei mir positiv war. Gerade diese kleinen Einschübe zu speziellen Tieren oder tückischen Fallen in der Wüstenstadt sorgten für einiges an Abwechslung. Man weiß nie so genau, was hinter der nächsten Ecke wartet!

Farah als Protagonistin mochte ich zudem echt gerne. Sie bietet viel Identifikationspotenzial für junge Mädchen, die noch lernen ihren Weg zu gehen. Ihr Mut und ihre Loyalität gegenüber ihren Freunden fand

ich sehr schön. Allgemein war die Dynamik der Charaktere wirklich gelungen und ich habe sie stetig angefeuert. Dabei bleiben Farahs Freunde leider etwas blass auf den wenigen Seiten des Buches, für ein Kinderbuch kann man da aber auch noch mal ein Auge zudrücken. Die Randfiguren des Spiels blieben auch recht stereotypisch, erfüllten im Rahmen des Plots jedoch genau ihren Zweck. Ich persönlich hätte es noch super gefunden, etwas mehr Hintergrund Informationen zu den einzelnen Charakteren zu erhalten – hier konzentriert sich alles stark auf das Spiel und zwischen den Zeilen kann man nicht sehr viel herauslesen. Es gab auch so ein paar Momente, die ich als „abgehackt“ empfunden habe, weil es mehrere Zeitsprünge in den Kapiteln gab, wodurch ich 1-2 Mal etwas rausgekommen bin.

Mal angesehen davon ist der Lesefluss aber sehr flott und man kann das Buch gut in wenigen Stunden durchschmökern – und es macht dabei noch enorm viel Spaß. Ich habe es fast in einem Rutsch durchgelesen, weil die Seiten nur so dahinfliegen und ich wissen wollte, ob am Ende alles gut ausgeht – als erwachsener Leser wird man hier zwar nicht sehr oft überrascht, aber das hat der Story echt keinen Abbruch getan. Wie gesagt – man bekommt genau, was der Klappentext einem verrät und deshalb wird man nicht enttäuscht. Die Autorin hat sich zudem bemüht ein paar Verstrickungen bezüglich der Charaktere einzubauen, sodass sich die Gegenwart des Spiels mit der Vergangenheit der Realität ein wenig überschneidet – das fand ich gegen Ende wirklich schön aufgelöst und hat mich zum Schmunzeln gebracht.

Fazit

Insgesamt ist „Paheli“ ein schönes Kinderbuch, das gradlinig und altersgerecht ein Abenteuer erzählt, welches trotz Vorhersehbarkeit Spaß beim Lesen macht und mit sympathischer Protagonistin aufwartet, die durch ihre Kultur und ihre Art zu Denken eine frische Brise ins Kinderbuch bringt. Ich würde das Buch allen empfehlen, die auf der Suche nach einer kurzweiligen und atmosphärischen Geschichte sind. Dank Wüsten-Setting und Spiel-Thematik wird einem hier nicht so schnell langweilig. Außerdem – für Jungs und Mädchen gleichermaßen toll!

Anmerkung: Bei diesem Buch handelt es sich um ein Rezensionsexemplar, das mir vom Verlag zur Verfügung gestellt wurde. Dies beeinflusst meine Meinung jedoch in keinsten Weise. Meine Rezensionen spiegeln ehrliches Leser-Feedback wieder und ich verdiene damit kein Geld :)

Alice Cai says

1* dnf: 124/294 (I was wondering why I was reading this so fast when I realized I was trying to get it over with.)

I keep waiting for the game to actually start and the first game was really lame. I don't really care about the characters which is a problem. I feel like I kept waiting for the story to get to the point. Also it unnaturally throws in a lot of Farah's culture constantly at unnecessary moments. Wow CHAI TEA!!! So awkward and unnecessary what the hell. For example some of the foods and references to her past could have been left out. It wasn't blended well with the story like the magic tree house series where the information was actually interesting. The game was terrible. Reading a game about Mancala doesn't work at all.

? Jamieson ? says

More of a 3.5 star really. It was really fast paced which I liked, and the representation was great. The setting was okay, but I found the characters a bit boring. Rtc

Ava says

This is such an excellent Middle Grade novel. I'm so happy this book exists. It's fast-paced, beautiful, and intriguing, and perfect for all ages - not just middle grade readers. The stunning description will leave you hungry (for the described food) and wishing you could see what Farah and her friends are (for the architecture and more). I would HIGHLY recommend this one.

RTC.

CW (The Quiet Pond) ? says

Jumanji + steampunk + Middle-Eastern influences + tons of awesome = *The Gauntlet*. ?

- When I was a kid, I watched Jumanji and cried my eyes out because I was terrified. Haha! But THIS is awesome; perfect if you want an exciting adventure with unexpected twists and turns.
 - This is a middle-grade book, but honestly? *EVERYONE* can enjoy this book! It's so much fun!
 - I adored the characters! They showed strength through adversity and weakness, and showed that, by working together, we can accomplish amazing things.
 - The descriptions of the food and scenery were lush and gorgeous.
-

Silvana [The Book Voyagers] says

The Gauntlet is for sure one of my most anticipated 2017 books. Karuna Riazi is my hero and I look up to her so much.

I saw a bit of Jumanji and a bit of Wizard of Oz to be honest too. I loved loved this book and how it was written. The chapters are short so it has that easy flow that middle grade novels have. It is 1000% adventures and action and games and all of these wonderful things everyone will love. It has a lot of puzzle games and board games, which I adore in real life and to see them in this book is just fabulous. Plus I didn't know all of them so it's always nice to find out about more new stuff!

This book is filled with delicious descriptions of food that made my mouth watered and made my tummy growled. I am the heart eyes emoji when I read those passages and I seriously felt like I could smell the desserts and snacks and sweets this story had.

And let's not forget our main character, Farah, and her two best friends, Alex and Essie. This book is all about friendship and family and bonding and teaming up with new friends. It's just a wonderful MG book that for sure kids will love and I'm sure teens/adults will be in wonder of such a magical world Karuna

created.

Nafiza says

What a ride. I don't quite know how to begin this review.

So that's how I will begin it. Ha. When I feel too much for a book, I generally don't like talking about it because I want to keep these feelings close to me. I have known Karuna for a while now and have been anticipating this book ever since I knew it existed. Not just because she is my friend and a wonderful writer but also because how important this book is and what its existence means.

First though, the synopsis of *The Gauntlet*:

A trio of friends from New York City find themselves trapped inside a mechanical board game that they must dismantle in order to save themselves and generations of other children in this action-packed debut that's a steampunk *Jumanji* with a Middle Eastern flair.

When twelve-year-old Farah and her two best friends get sucked into a mechanical board game called *The Gauntlet of Blood and Sand*—a puzzle game akin to a large Rubik's cube—they know it's up to them to defeat the game's diabolical architect in order to save themselves and those who are trapped inside, including her baby brother Ahmed. But first they have to figure out how.

Under the tutelage of a lizard guide named Henrietta Peel and an aeronaut Vijay, the Farah and her friends battle camel spiders, red scorpions, grease monkeys, and sand cats as they prepare to face off with the maniacal Lord Amari, the man behind the machine. Can they defeat Amari at his own game...or will they, like the children who came before them, become cogs in the machine?

The book opens at a gathering of relatives and friends (two of them) to celebrate Farah's birthday. Farah has moved to a new place and is trying to settle into a new school, away from two of her closest friends. A new space has opened between them, a new strangeness that Farah doesn't quite know how to smooth away. The atmosphere is filled with the smell of cooking food; there is mithai somewhere (in *The Gauntlet*, there's always mithai somewhere).

When Ahmed jumps into the strange new board game that Farah's aunt gifted her with and disappears, Farah and her friends have no choice but to follow him and bring him back. The synopsis tells you this but what it doesn't express is the wonder of the world inside the game. The City of Paheli with its vibrant colours and desert storms. The souk, the sand, the movement, the tenor of a breathing place.

Karuna's descriptions are wondrous and to me, they feel like looking into a mirror and seeing a familiar face looking back. I know someone like Madame Nasirah who is the game's guide and who gives help to Farah, Alex, and Essie. She insists on feeding the children and that is such a familiar action from a character I am certain exists in my extended family. Our mothers/aunts always try to feed everyone they can.

The food as I have mentioned before is always present and always decadent and for me, so gloriously, familiar. I have talked before of reading about the high teas containing strange foods I can only read about in books. This was entirely different. In *The Gauntlet* I read about food that is familiar to me, food that I eat and also food I want to eat. Hah.

The pacing is on point. Farah and her friends have to complete certain challenges so there's a wavelike motion in the pacing of the story. Momentum builds, the event happens, there is a lull and then the next event approaches and things repeat.

The relationships and the characters in *The Gauntlet* are also very well done. The friendship between Essie, Farah, and Alex is wonderfully portrayed. The kids have their own individual personalities and Karuna has illustrated this wonderfully in the little details. The relationship between Ahmed and Farah is perhaps the most complex one because Farah being the older sister feels responsibility for her younger brother but also a little bit of resentment. However, Ahmed pulls through in the end (to know what I mean by this you have to read the book).

Henrietta Peel, the very intelligent and intriguing lizard, was perhaps one of my favourite characters (it's difficult to choose). Vijay is also intriguing and I reckon I would have like to read more of him and Aunt Zohra.

What most intrigued me about the novel is the climax. There is action, of course, but before that, curiously, there is a final challenge that shows the heart of the book. Rather than blood and duels, the antagonist and protagonist battle with their minds and their senses.

I could continue talking about this book but honestly, the most important thing I can say about it is: read it. Buy it for yourself, buy it for the child in your life. For some it will be a window into a strange new world, for others it will be a mirror which reflects shimmers of a life they didn't expect to see in books. Diversity and the importance of representation aside, *The Gauntlet* tells a wonderful story of friendship and family. I strongly recommend it.

rachel says

The Gauntlet was one of my most highly anticipated releases of the year. The premise of retelling *Jumanji*, one of my all-time favourite childhood movies, with steampunk + Middle Eastern influences sounded too good to be true... which, in the end, it was. I know that I am definitely a black sheep with this opinion but I just did not enjoy this book as much as everyone else seemed to. I struggled to even make it to the end of the story! It was undeniably enjoyable but I just did not enjoy it *that* much.

The story was incredibly plot-driven and while I usually prefer my stories to have more of a focus on the characters, I could have forgiven that if the plotline had actually been interesting. In theory, I did enjoy exploring the world of *Gauntlet* with Farah. Riazi managed to capture the vibrancy of the Middle Eastern-inspired setting and it was a treat to see a such a rich, gritty non-Western fantasy world dripping with effortless diverse elements... but there is only so much a pretty backdrop can do. It cannot hide a boring plot and that was my main problem with this book: it was boring. I loved the idea of having to face three incredibly difficult, life-threatening challenges to win the game. It gave me *HP & the Philosopher's Stone* feels (!) but the challenges were so mild it made me cry. They were dull! There was not a single shred of urgency to them. One of them was literally a taste test... No, I'm not kidding. **How am I meant to be**

scared for these kids when they are literally just tasting desserts? Is that really anyone's idea of terrifying? It was incredibly underwhelming. I know some people are going to justify this by pointing out that this is an MG fantasy, not YA, but middle grade readers are not stupid or gullible. They do not need you to dumb down plotlines or skate around life or death situations. This should not be an excuse, especially because I can effortlessly list about five MG stories right now that balance the targeted audience with a gritty, complex plotline perfectly.

My other problem was with the characters. While Farah was a decent protagonist herself, the secondary characters did not have shining personalities. I felt like we barely got to know them at all, even though they were just as central and present in the plotline as Farah herself. I don't even remember their names! Everything we knew about them was told to us by Farah's inner monologue and I really wanted to get to know them from *them*.

Overall?

If you are looking for a gorgeously written setting or a fantastically diverse cast, *The Gauntlet* may be for you but I was personally disappointed. I did not connect to the characters like I would have liked to. Farah was a decent protagonist but I didn't feel like I got to know the secondary characters as well as we should. The plotline was also lacking. The gritty steampunk *Jumanji* retelling we were promised was... dull, to put it mildly. I was bored by the challenges and the story as a whole. I wanted *more* from this book but I am hopeful that Riazi's sophomore story will much better.

Review copy provided by the publisher for an honest review.

Shira Glassman says

In this book, a Bangladeshi-American tween named Farah, And Her Two Friends, have to battle a sadistic, hidden game-master in order to rescue her brother from a board game. They have to play by his rules -- showing up on time for each game, not making it too obvious they're trying to bust out, and only looking for poor Ahmad during their few moments of free time. The games include, for example, life-size Mancala with holes big enough to fall into that are also full of bones, so the whole thing is very cinematic veering on kiddie-appropriate horror.

My favorite characters were the other prisoners of the game, who populate what's basically a timeless Bangladeshi city complete with souk and palaces. The tween MC's meet a mysterious woman who keeps feeding them decadent lunches and then forgetting them entirely, a cute guy in a hot air balloon who's been trapped in this world since he was their age (I don't think he was described as cute in-text but he appealed to *me* and I liked the resolution of his storyline), and best of all--a Resistance composed entirely of lizards, led by Henrietta Peel. Yes, a female resistance captain *who is also a lizard*. I sure hope there's fan art!

The comparisons between the elevator pitches for *The Gauntlet* and that movie *Jumanji* are obvious, and possibly also to *Labyrinth*, but like JKR (who also built on the shoulders of MANY giants), Riazi shines most in all the bits that are completely new -- the cultural setting, for example, and the surprise resolution. Warning for readers who are the type to get hungry for what they read -- you are going to need snacks. There's even a *game* about snacks--that was one of my favorite parts.

Props to Riazi for a poignant bit of imagery in which we find out, when Farah gets the chance to drink

moonlight, that it "tastes lonely." I love concepts like that. Also, Farah's from New York City and has just moved to a less diverse school where she's the only hijabi, so when she sees others who look like her in the game-world's marketplace, her reaction is "the feeling spread through her, a gulp of seltzer, bright and bubbly..."

There are bits where I felt like the references to real life got too detailed--for example, at one point they have to do something reminiscent of riding a skateboard, and it's not just "like riding a skateboard", there's an extra note thrown in there that it was her cousin who taught her to ride--but maybe these are there to give the audience a greater picture of Farah's "regular" life since we only meet her the morning of her getting sucked into the game.

I would highly recommend *The Gauntlet* as a book to hand the young person in your life who's into the "kids getting into fantastical adventures" genre. I did have a good time reading it, but I guess I haven't read very much Middle Grade lit in the past twenty years because it did feel a bit young for me (but it *should!* I am not the target audience; I'll be thirty-six this fall.)

TW for random blood and bones that don't.... belong to any of the MC's? Just used as horror elements.

Lauren Stoolfire says

The Gauntlet, a reverse steampunk-esque *Jumanji* and meets *The Wizard of Oz* inspired MG adventure with a Middle Eastern flair is exactly my cup of tea! I don't know about you, but the moment I heard about this novel I immediately knew I had to get my hands on a copy. I don't read middle grade that often, but this one sounded like it would be well worth my time. Sure enough, it absolutely paid off. There is so much to love about Riazi's diverse fantasy debut - it has something for everyone and it is perfect for readers of all ages who love a good adventure. I'm really looking forward to Karuna Riazi's next project!

Ben Babcock says

I won a copy of *The Gauntlet* in a Goodreads First Reads giveaway.

Farah Mirza is a gamer from a family of gamers. The Mirzas love all sorts of tabletop games, card games, and puzzles. On her twelfth birthday, she mistakenly receives the Gauntlet, a malevolent and self-aware board game. When her younger brother, Ahmad, gets trapped *inside* the game, Farah and her two friends have no choice but to enter the game themselves and beat it in order to retrieve Ahmad and exit. But the Gauntlet has not played in over twenty years, and its Architect is ... hungry.

I tried hard to put myself into a middle grade mindset for this one. My reading for younger audiences skews almost exclusively towards the older end of YA, partly because that's the age group I'd teach if I were in a regular high school and because those are the stories that most appeal to me. Middle grade novels, of course, can often have simpler or at least less subtle structures and subtexts because they're appealing to a younger demographic. While that's definitely the case here, I think Riazi does a fantastic job telling a tale that will hold the interest of older readers as well. I can easily see a teenager or adult enjoying this (I did), and it's the

kind of story I could see a parent reading out loud to or with a child who is on the younger end of this audience.

The plot is an intense and fast-paced one. Structured around the three challenges that Farah, Essie, and Alex must win in order to defeat the Architect, Riazi gives neither her characters nor readers much time to breath as they rush all over the city of Paheli. Yet the challenges themselves take up little enough of the book (if anything, they feel rushed). In the intervals Riazi creates a dazzling environment for the Gauntlet: a dream-like, shifting fantasy city that would be marvellous if it weren't out to get the players. The talking lizards are cool, though.

Farah shines as *The Gauntlet's* protagonist. She's 12, that impossible age that straddles childhood and adolescence. Riazi explores this without making it too big of a deal, mentioning how Farah is feeling awkward around her friend Essie because she worries board games might be too childish, and of course, exploring Farah's changing relationship with Ahmad. This is a tall order to accomplish in a book that takes place, essentially, over the space of 24 hours, but I like what Riazi does here. Farah is clever, cunning, and courageous; these qualities allow her to excel at games and hence at the Gauntlet.

I wish the other characters had more prominence. Although individual personality elements shine through—Essie is the impetuous one, Alex the more reluctant but analytical one—they lack defining moments that let them become heroic figures in their own right. Farah shoulders most of the story here, with Alex and Essie serving as her foils, as comic relief, or just plain sidekicks.

The Gauntlet is receiving lots of attention for its Muslim cast of characters. Farah is a hijabi and comments early on in the novel how, her family having moved to Manhattan, she feels out of place in a way she didn't in Queens. This is an interesting observation for someone like me, who is neither Muslim nor female nor a resident of a metropolis so big it gets boroughs. I'm sure Muslim children, or children of Bangladeshi descent, will enjoy having a character who looks like them and comes from their cultural background as the hero of a story.

What you might not pick up on from the publicity, though, is the way Riazi casually normalizes the names of games, food, etc., that will be unfamiliar to most Western readers. They don't even show up in italics, and although Riazi does an excellent job describing the various desserts and confections these names often correspond to, you're best off Googling them so your mouth can water at their appearance. This is refreshing, because while it seems like books are making strides in terms of character representation, the cultures of those characters are often sprinkled in like some kind of exotic language layered atop English. In *The Gauntlet*, they are simply part of the Mirza household, just like Monopoly or marbles.

The Gauntlet is equal parts exciting and enchanting. It has a lot of moving elements that come together to create a great story. Its characters are not as dynamic or interesting as I'd like—but I'm not a regular reader of middle grade, so I'm not sure how much that's par for the course. I'm having a hard time figuring out who *wouldn't* enjoy this book, though. Older readers might find it a little lighter, certainly a much quicker read, but at the end of the day it's the kind of story that any person can kick back and immerse themselves in for a few hours.

Laura (bbliophile) says

This was SO GOOD! I loved the characters and the world and the food descriptions and just EVERYTHING
Review to come

BooksTwins says

4 estrellas. En un primer momento no me convenció la idea de que fuera un retelling de jumanji, pues nunca me gustó esa historia. Pero sorprendentemente logro engancharme al toque pues solo se queda con lo básico de jumanji que sería el juego que te atrapa y hay que ganar, pero el transcurso de la historia es muy distinta a la idea de jumanji, a mí parecer.

Los personajes principales son tres niños de 12 años, pero son tan inteligentes y habilidosos que parecían mayores.

La verdad súper recomendable. Es fresca, divertida y, principalmente, esta bien escrita.

Sue (Hollywood News Source) says

They say good shoes take you to good places, I believe the same thing could be said to books. The Gauntlet is that book.

It will take you to a place where winning a challenge is a must to survive. It will take you to an unimaginable land where cultures intersect. It will take you to a community where vibrancy and comradery exist between a cluster of people.

It seems so simple, but the lasting effect is *there*. The Gauntlet easily become my favorite. It has everything I want in a book, there's the poetic composition, subtleties, family and friend's dynamics, and the wanderlust vibes. Also, I was *really* weak for the mouth-watering food descriptions. And, of course, the heart of the story which is Farah's love to her young brother. Big sister FTW.

Verdict: Without doubt, The Gauntlet is going to places. I love it. Full review to come. A great start-up for people that are unfamiliar with MG, highly recommended to kids that enjoy challenges.
