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Finding Fortune



Synopsis

Running away from home isn't as easy as Ren thinks it will be. At least she isn't running very far—just a few miles to the ghost town of Fortune . . . or Mis-Fortune as everyone else calls it. Mis-Fortune on the Mississippi. Supposedly, there's an abandoned school on the outskirts with cheap rooms for rent. Ren knows her plan sounds crazy. But with only a few more weeks until Dad comes home from his tour of duty in Afghanistan, she also knows she has to do something drastic so Mom will come to her senses and stop seeing that creep Rick Littleton for good. From the moment she enters the school's shadowy halls, Ren finds herself drawn into its secrets. Every night old Mrs. Baxter, the landlady, wanders the building on a mysterious quest. What could she be up to? And can Mrs. Baxter's outlandish plan to transform the gym into a pearl-button museum ever succeed? With a quirky new friend named Hugh at her side, Ren sets out to solve the mystery that could save Fortune from fading away. But what about her family's future? Can that be saved too?

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 12 years

Grade Level: 5 - 7

Customer Reviews

Twelve-year-old Ren Winningham looks forward to the day her dad returns from Afghanistan, but she begins to doubt her dream of a happy family reunion. Although her parents separated before her dad left on his tour, Ren believes they'll get back together. Or she did until Rick moved into their

neighborhood. Her mom insists Rick's only a friend, but Ren doesn't believe her. To get her mom's attention, Ren rides her bike to Fortune, an almost-ghost town, and rents a room in the old schoolhouse. There she meets Hildy Baxter who owns the school and hopes to turn it into a button museum. As summer progresses, Ren meets other inhabitants of Fortune: Mayor Joy and his mule Wayne, eight-year-old Hugh and his mother Mine, handyman Garrett, soap making sisters Clarissa and Colette and their Bengal cats. When Ren learns of a hidden treasure that could save Hildy's museum, she and Hugh team up to find it. With the help of Hildy's grandson Tucker, the race is on to find the treasure in time to save Hildy from bankruptcy. Main character Ren is caring and determined to keep her family together. She protects Hugh from bullying, helps his cooking-challenged mom, and works hard to save Hildy's dream. This novel uses an array of fascinating characters and an intriguing mystery to introduce middle school kids to a forgotten part of Iowa's history. In the early 1900s, button-making was a thriving industry along the Mississippi River. Freshwater mussel shells were the source of mother-of-pearl buttons and, occasionally, something much more valuable. A great story for schools, libraries, family read alouds, and kids who love mysteries.

As in her three earlier novels for young readers (*Ghost Girl*, *Singing Hands*, and *Here Lies Linc*), Ray makes history accessible and compelling by framing it with a terrific story. Twelve-year-old Ren, discontent, lonely for her dad away in the military, angry with her mom for getting on with her life, decides to run away and have her own adventure. She doesn't run any farther than her bicycle will take her: down the road to Fortune. Fortune is like many ghost towns scattered across America: beneath the disrepair and dereliction lies a vibrant history. Based on an Iowa river town which once thrived as part of the pearl button industry, Fortune is now almost deserted. But an old schoolhouse has been turned into a hotel for quirky residents, and Ren takes a room there. Hildy, the owner of the schoolhouse/hotel passionately longs to turn the gym into a button museum, but she is in danger of bankruptcy. Ren opens her heart to Fortune. She befriends a younger child, tries to help Hildy realize her dream of the button museum, and meets a cute boy her own age who also wants good things for Hildy and the hotel. Through the efforts of Ren and her new friends, a mystery is solved, the hotel is saved, and Ren and her mother share a new understanding. The story is imaginatively conceived, well researched, and beautifully written.

The summer after sixth grade is one of all sorts of changes for Ren. Her dad is serving in Afghanistan and, before he left, he moved out of the family home. Now her mother has made a new

friend named Rick and Ren fears that her parents are headed for divorce. To try to break up the friendship, Ren runs away from home and winds up in Fortune - a nearby ghost town. Hildy has opened up the old school as a boarding house and is busy searching it for a hidden treasure. She is also turning it into a button museum to let others know about the history of the town which was one a center for making shell buttons. Ren makes friends with a lonely young boy named Hugh and together they explore the school to try to find the hidden treasure. They are sometimes helped by Hildy's grandson Tucker after Hugh and Tucker finally become friends. The story gave an interesting history of a little known industry and was also a good story about learning to accept changes. I enjoyed getting to know Ren and learning more about shell buttons.

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