

# **The 1<sup>st</sup> Runner Up of English Section**

## **Junior Division**

**Name of Winner : Ho Tin Lai**

**Name of School : St. Joseph's College**

**Book Title : *Goblin Secrets***

**Author : William Alexander**

**Publisher : McElderry Books**

Goblin Secrets is a book written by William Alexander which focuses on the journey of a young boy named Rownie. His elder brother, Rowan, vanished after performing in a secret play, and Rownie feels lost without him. This is a tale about Rownie's search for Rowan.

Rownie is a young boy who lives with his adopted "grandmother" Graba and her grandchildren (here, grandchildren mean "Graba's children"). Graba tasks

Rownie to get gear oil for her, so he does.

After finishing the errand, he bumps into Vass, who is also a grandchild of Graba. As she and Rownie talk, she suddenly mimics Graba's voice and asks him where Graba's gear oil is, then as fast as her sudden change in attitude, she starts shouting "stop it" and "I am not your grandchild". Then, as Vass leaves, Rownie stands still in shock. Vass had already left Graba's house when Graba gave him the errand, so she wouldn't have known about it. He stands for quite some time and only starts moving when it is almost dusk.

He runs and runs until he sees a stage, where goblins are performing with masks. Rownie is intrigued. Acting is illegal in Zombay (the place where the story takes place), but Goblins can bypass this rule as they are not legally considered as persons. While they are performing, they need a child to act for one of their roles,

and Rownie volunteers. The audience are suspicious of the goblins, and they attach a string on Rownie so that they can pull him off stage if anything alarming happens. At one point the lights are turned off to enhance the performance, but the audience find it suspicious, so they yank him offstage. Rownie decides to crawl under the stage to avoid the crowd.

Under the stage, he meets a goblin named Semele, who offers him tea and talks about Rowan. After that, Rownie returns to Graba, but Graba suspects Rownie of drinking what Semele offered him, so she chants a spell. Fortunately, Rownie escapes through the windows. He isn't free, as Graba grandchildren follow him and speak like her, which implies that Graba can control most of her grandchildren. Luckily, he also escapes. Then, he bumps into the goblins from the play, who welcome him and let him stay with them.

After a while, Rownie decides to meet Graba at the Southside Rail Station so he can get more info on Rowan, but while he is on his way, he bumps into The Mayor and Vass. The Mayor wants to see Rownie because he wants to invite him to join his troupe. Just as they are conversing, Graba comes and rattles the cargo. In that moment, Rownie sees a familiar face in The Mayor's troupe... Rowan is part of the troupe!

Rownie quickly goes over to his brother, but Rowan doesn't respond. Rownie doesn't understand what was happening, so he asks Graba who is nearby and who explains that Rowan is now a puppet, one of the puppets of The Mayor who is trying to use them to communicate with the River and stop a flood. "But it won't work!" she says. She leaves soon after, as she has no use for Rownie anymore. In the end, Rownie carries Rowan back to the Goblins who realize what is happening. Rownie puts different masks on Rowan, hoping he will move, and

none of them work except for “The River” mask. When it is put on Rowan, he starts to talk, and stops the flooding by jumping into the River.

After reading *Goblin Secrets*, I’ve had a few thoughts about the book’s plot that I’d like to share, starting with points I enjoy about the book. The book’s beginning is interesting since it sets up the disappearance of Rowan really well and emphasizes the fact that Rownie misses him. Rownie’s feeling of missing his brother is especially strong in the moment when Rownie arrives at the river where his mother died, where he would think about his mother and “greet” her, but he would also dwell on how Rowan taught him to “greet” her (which is by skipping stones on the water) and how Rowan used to carry him and swim across the river. It enhances how Rownie truly misses Rowan and highlights just how mysterious Rowan’s disappearance really is. Everything is also described clearly; it is precise

with details, and you can visualize everything in your mind.

There is also one scene, which I have written about in the story section, where Vass uses the tone of Graba and says something that she shouldn't know. This indirectly implies that Graba could control her grandchildren, and this becomes more evident when you read the scene later on about Rownie being chased by the grandchildren. I think this is very clever as one: Graba's control is foreshadowed, and two, it is done so very indirectly, so you would have to put some thought into it to understand it.

However, despite enjoying some parts of the book, I think there is much that the book could improve on. The middle of the book is very dull, and I feel like it isn't integral to the story. If I had to describe it, I would say that it feels like a filler in a series. Don't get me wrong:

fillers can be fun, interesting, and enjoyable, but the filler in *Goblin Secrets* is just too boring. Here, it is just about Rownie leading people to where the Goblins are performing and watching the Goblins' acting.

Here, the Goblins' show also just doesn't work for me. Picture this: a play with actors wearing masks with no props and costumes. I don't know about you, but that doesn't not sound interesting to me. A play with costumes and props will be much more immersive as you can visualize it better. Just imagine a guy in a blue shirt and red shorts wearing a mask and performing without anything around him.... You probably couldn't take him seriously at all! These setbacks really ruined this part of the book for me. I think that the writer should write what Rownie is able to imagine based on the play to not only get rid of the fact that there are no costumes or props, but also to see what Rownie thinks of the performance.

After the filler, I already lost a lot of motivation to read on, and it really stopped me from liking the book. So, when I got to the part where Rownie finds Rowan, I was excited. I thought maybe the moment could save this book for me, but I was wrong... The part where Rowan wears "The River" mask and could move again just didn't make too much sense. You could've said it is due to magic, but that is never really confirmed in the book, and besides, that wouldn't be satisfying.

Not only that, but the entire interaction between Rownie and Rowan before Rowan jumps into the River lasts for two pages, making me feel like the book downplays the fact that Rowan is awake again. It not only throws all the build-up for the moment out the window, but also makes it feel like Rowan moving is only a minor plot point with no significance or impact on the story whatsoever! Other than that, the author also barely wrote a single word that could express what

Rownie feels after seeing his brother move and thus, everything came off as calm and unemotional, and ruined the book for me even more.

In the end, I must say that *Goblin Secrets* is a book that is at the lower end of the “enjoyable” spectrum for me. It has good points, but the cons outweigh them too much. It begins like a statue with nice details all over, but halfway through admiring it, a wrecking ball smashes away some parts of it. There are still detailed parts, but they ultimately look a lot less appealing. And that’s exactly what the book is like to me: I enjoy the details of the story, but the downsides in the two parts that I mentioned just ruined the book for me.