The Pickle King

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BfK Rating: 3

A melange of rain, squelch and fear sets the scene in this spine-chilling story filled with terrifying villains and gruesome ghosts. It’s the summer holidays in the small American town of Elbow, renowned for its chili pickle factory, dank streets and constant rain, and Bea is at a loose end, wondering which other students are around over the summer, when her friend Sam rings the doorbell, begging her to follow him to a rickety old house. There, underneath the floorboards, lies a body, green and putrefying? and with only one eye.

Forming a gang with a random group of kids, also unfortunate enough to be spending their holidays in Elbow, Bea and Sam try to make sense of this and a series of further incidences that seem to be connected. With the discovery of a bag filled with human intestines, the story becomes darker and ever more sinister.

The author describes a universe that is claustrophobic and intense, soaked by constant rain that depresses the spirits, and peopled with characters that are for the most part dysfunctional. Intensely visual, with an intricate plot that twists and turns, the story is taut and exciting, but not for the squeamish. Larger, underlying themes of child neglect, mental health issues and homelessness are present but not explored, which is perhaps a pity though to do so would, arguably, change the book’s emphasis from horror story, shocking, thrilling and blood-spattered, to something more realistic.

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