

YOUNG ADULT

How to Win at Scrabble in a Parallel Universe

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THE FINGERTIPS OF DUNCAN DORFMAN

By Meg Wolitzer

294 pp. Dutton. \$16.99. (Middle grade; ages 8 to 12)

Even in a literary cosmos populated by teenage wizards and smart alecks, the characters in Meg Wolitzer's first young adult novel might seem fantastical bordering on ridiculous. Kids obsessed with Scrabble? Who play in a national championship? With a first prize of \$10,000? Come on.

Apart, however, from a protagonist with a magical power convenient for winning games, "The Fingertips of Duncan Dorfman" is set in a world that is very real, and that Wolitzer knows well. Not only is she a tournament Scrabble player herself, one of her sons participated in the National School Scrabble Championship, which attracts 200 children to compete for a prize of, yes, \$10,000.

Wolitzer gets the Scrabble right. She doesn't shy away from lingo like "Betsy's Feet" (a mnemonic for the letters that can be appended to KA to form acceptable three-letter words) or "bingo stem" (letters that can be combined with other letters to form words using all seven tiles).

But Scrabble is just a stage for Wolitzer's empathetic and sometimes farcical exploration of the emotionally confusing lives of preadolescent boys and girls searching for identity. Duncan Dorfman and his down-on-her-luck single mom move to her hometown, Drilling Falls, Pa., where she works a low-wage job and buys him shirts in hues of mustard, ketchup and relish. ("It could be a set," she says.) They live with her "box shaped" Aunt Djuna in a house with "squirrel colored" walls that smells of yams and beans, "the same way that the smell of brownie mix or roast chicken would float your way in other houses." At school, Duncan is nicknamed "Lunch Meat" after someone slaps a piece of bologna on his back. "Life was joyless — that was the best word for it."

But Duncan has a gift: he can "read" printed text without a glance, by running the fingers of his left hand over the words. When Duncan unveils his talent in the middle school cafeteria, the resident bully, Carl Slater, who was forced to join the Scrabble club but then discovered he liked the game, sees his potential as a partner: Duncan can feel the tiles inside the Scrabble bag. Meanwhile, in Oregon, brainiac April Blunt wants to prove to her family of jocks that Scrabble is indeed a sport. And in New York, Nate Saviano, a long-haired skateboarder pressed into full-time Scrabble training by a father seeking to avenge his own loss in the championship 25 years earlier, longs for the day when "he'd never have to form the words KEF or OORIE or QANAT again."

The kids meet at the (renamed) Youth Scrabble Tournament in (fictional) Yakamee, Fla. Duncan struggles with whether to use his power. Nate struggles with loyalty to his dad. As for April, I wish the book's main female character struggled with something other than longing for a boy she met once in a motel.

The tiles, and the behavior of the children and the adults, all fall into place, a bit more conveniently than they do in Scrabble or in life, or in Wolitzer's novels about midlife ennui. But the lessons learned are good ones, and it's hard to quibble with a story that brings together a tween in a mustard shirt and one with magenta hair to play a board game that promotes mental dexterity and linguistic ballet. Any kid who thinks it's cool that MARASCHINO is an anagram of HARMONICAS is cool with me. No wizardry required.

Stefan Fatsis is the author of "Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius, and Obsession in the World of Competitive Scrabble Players."