



[Home](#) > The Doldrums: A Badly Planned Adventure

The Doldrums: A Badly Planned Adventure

Books Reviewed:

[The Doldrums: A Badly Planned Adventure](#) [1]

Issue:

[215](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Stuart Dyer](#) [3]

Editorial Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

4

Archer B Helmsley is an explorer. It's in his blood. He lives in his grandparents' house - an enormous mansion filled with weird and wonderful stuffed animals with which Archer has deep and meaningful conversations. Sometimes he questions his own sanity, but 'Am I crazy?' is not an appropriate question to ask a stuffed polar bear! When his beloved, world-renowned grandparents go missing on an iceberg, Archer knows that he alone can save them. However, as his best friend Oliver is quick to point out, Archer lacks the necessary experience to conduct a polar rescue mission. In fact, Archer's mother rarely lets him leave the house. Luckily, help soon arrives in the shape of a French, wooden-legged ex-ballerina who moves into the house across the street. The three friends hold clandestine conferences in the school library to plan their operation and these simple meetings are brilliantly described with subtle and infectious humour. They are animated by Gannon's beautiful, sepia illustrations, which have a deliciously alluring quality. Their warmth and charm invite the reader to leap in and join the story.

Gannon writes with wonderful empathy for children and understands that nothing is scarier than a merciless, hard-hearted teacher with a violent vendetta against her pupils and, in Mrs Murkley, the book has a terrifying villain who evokes the nightmarish Ms Trunchbull from Dahl's **Matilda**.

The exciting third act features a daring museum escape and a nasty encounter with three hungry tigers. Yet this adrenalin-filled climax is somewhat disappointing as it marks a departure from the calm and whimsy of the children's planning and preparations in previous chapters. As long as future books in the series allow ample opportunity for Archer and his friends to plot, plan and argue their way in and out of trouble, they too should be a joy to read for all young readers.

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[1] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/the-doldrums-a-badly-planned-adventure>

[2] <http://ww.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/215>

[3] <http://www.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/stuart-dyer>