

Knights Unite

Laurel Colless

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Activist children at an environmentalist school face challenges to their developing ideals in the busy adventure novel Knights Unite.

In Laurel Colless's splashy mystery novel *Knights Unite*, precocious children fight to protect the environment from corrupt businesses and the destructive powers they wield.

While cleaning the depths of the ocean on a routine assignment, Riva and Roly rescue a mysterious merboy, Shem, from a tangle of discarded nets. Meanwhile, back at their environmentalist school, Peter struggles to balance the diplomatic demands of hosting his old friend Devlin, who just become the CEO of the infamous Albacore fishing company, with his duty to protect the environment. The novel weaves Riva's and Peter's stories and tensions together to create an adventure in which young people are challenged to fight for what they believe in without alienating the ones they love.

Riva is a standout heroine of exceptional complexity. Though introduced as a stereotypical know-it-all overachiever, bossing her way to the top of the classroom and stepping on everyone's toes along the way, depth is achieved via her family background. Her father threatens to pull her out of her strange school and place her in a normal one; her free-spirited mother, who first taught her to care about the environment, makes her uncomfortable because of the former's performative outbursts and disregard for social graces. During her adventure, Riva asks herself which of her parents she is more like, and her answer evolves as she explores her confusion in depth.

Indeed, the book maintains balance in all of its characterizations; its children often remain confused, and there's never a sense that the right answers are a deus ex machina away. Instead, each problem has to be solved by remaining stuck on it, often for pages at a time, until the characters have opportunities to find new ways of presenting issues to one other. As a result, every character has plenty of opportunities to act, demonstrating their individual value to the team. Even minor characters, like Riva's roommate Tipi, have the chance to solve significant hurdles in ways only they could. However, the abundance of conflicts the children face also slows the progress of the book as a whole, even though the brief chapters brim with action. Indeed, for lengthy portions of the novel, Albacore's pollution and Shem's mystery are rendered secondary to the mundane aspects of school life.

Knights Unite is an exciting adventure novel with a strong environmentalist message.

AUSTIN MITCHELL (February 11, 2025)

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