

The Crafter: The Mysterious Game

Dan Sugralinov

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A chapter book about a boy coming out of his shell in a new town, The Crafter is a fun tribute to gaming.

Popular roleplayer and sandbox console games are invoked in Dan Sugralinov's fantasy novel *The Crafter*, in which a lonely boy's online skills transfer to his offline life.

When eleven-year-old Kenny's parents separate, he, his cat, Whiskers, and his mother move to Kansas. The move disheartens Kenny, but he's buoyed by an upgraded gaming console—a gift that's intended to ease the transition. But a new game has been preloaded on the device, and when Kenny begins to play it, the game's world spills into the real one.

Outside of Kenny's apartment is a forest, speaking to the book's sandbox game influence: tree bark is pixelated in brown squares alongside other familiar touchstones, like an inventory and Kenny's ability to craft items like a stone ax. Embellishments from other games, including magic and different threatening creatures, also factor in, making the book's outcome less predictable. Prompts that appear in the air guide Kenny, and prickly, sassy Whiskers's newfound ability to talk leads to entertainment.

Throughout the book, the focus is on Kenny's ability to navigate his changed environment. His family's story is less established. Indeed, the framework concerning his parents' problems and his feelings about them recedes as the book progresses. Details about Kenny's personality are sparse, too, while the book's secondary characters, including its bullies and teachers, are only sketched in.

The game's script is sometimes sage and sometimes practical; mantras are introduced, including "A strong foundation is the start to every grand adventure!" Though the connection between Kenny's adventure and his emotional needs is subtle, his thinking begins to shift; he becomes more confident. He tackles tasks like turning a log into planks, he renovates his in-game shelter with aplomb, and he fends off monsters. In this way, the book celebrates the positive aspects of gaming: Kenny is resourceful, good at problem-solving, and prone to creativity—within the game's parameters. Selecting the role of a Crafter also gives him a sense of identity and purpose. The play-by-play walk-through, however, results in a lagging pace; extraneous, italicized information about the game is interspersed with feedback about Kenny's progress and advancement.

In-game chapters alternate with those focused on Kenny's Kansas life, which are included each time he reaches a save point and is able to exit the game. In the real world, he feels apprehension over entering a new school and worries about making friends. These challenges start to overlap with what he's already experienced in the game. A late turn in the story, after Kenny invites his classmates into the game, sets the stage for a sequel but also leads to a rushed conclusion.

In the lighthearted fantasy novel *The Crafter*, a boy develops resolve through a beloved pastime.

KAREN RIGBY (November 13, 2023)

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