



The Underdogs

Sara Hammel

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Everyone has secrets...

Who killed Annabel Harper?

When a popular teen beauty's body is discovered by the pool at an elite tennis club, the regulars are shocked—especially twelve-year-old Evie and her best friend, Chelsea. While everyone else is haunted by Annabel's death, Evie and Chelsea jump on the case, dogging the footsteps of the lead detective as he investigates. As temperatures soar ver the summer, tensions rise, fingers are pointed, and a heroic act sets in motion a chain of events readers will never see coming.

The Underdogs Details

Date : Published May 31st 2016 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux (BYR)

ISBN : 9780374301613

Author : Sara Hammel

Format : Hardcover 320 pages

Genre : Mystery, Childrens, Middle Grade, Young Adult, Sports and Games, Sports

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From Reader Review The Underdogs for online ebook

AddisonY says

The Underdogs was one of my favorite books ever. It consists of mystery along with action. When a girl gets murdered at a nice country club, everyone is on alert for the killer. This book takes you through the adventure of Chelsea and her best friend Evie and how they try to solve the murder themselves. It also includes there everyday lives that revolve around this country club that is now known as the horror club. Along with a striking ending that will make you think about what you just read for a couple minutes.

Barbara says

Like some other reviewers, I figured that I'd solve the mystery in this book right away, and while I was pretty sure that I had the murderer pegged early on, there were other surprises that made this book a delight to read. Often, I am a tad bit bored by the predictability of middle grade titles, but that wasn't the case for this one. (Of course, after I finished reading it, I really understood the double meaning of the clever, clever title.) The book revolves around the murder of popular teen Annabel Harper whose body is found at a tennis club near Boston. As Detective Ted Ashlock interviews everyone who knew Annabel and tries to figure out possible motives, best friends Evie and Chelsea are on the case as well, eavesdropping on interviews and forming their own theories about whodunit. As the story shifts back and forth in time from what happened before Annabel died and what happened after she died, readers will quickly realize that there's something not right with the picture being painted. Twelve-year-old Evie has been dumped on her father, a former tennis pro, while her mother goes off to find herself, and he hasn't a clue about what to do with Evie. So self-absorbed and thoughtless is he that he even forgets to feed her or make her lunches, and she spends most of her time at the club hiding from some of the bullies who make fun of her size, weight, and eating habits. Chelsea often seeks her out and provides much-needed companionship. But it also becomes evident that Chelsea has a past too, and has suffered trauma that has left her emotionally and physically fragile. While it's true that this is a murder mystery, it's also a character study featuring a girl who somehow rises above all that life has thrown at her and finds herself in tennis. I loved when Evie starts pounding those tennis balls against the wall and later when Will starts practicing with her, and I simply adored how loyal Chelsea is to her friend. As the book nears its conclusion, the author's hints about Chelsea will have many readers rereading passages to identify when they first knew for sure what was going on. This was a satisfying debut novel, inspired by the way humans can often behave toward other humans, not to mention their four-legged friends.

Sarah says

Surprisingly absorbing middle school murder mystery. This is the story of twelve-year-old Evie and the summer a teenage girl's body is discovered floating in the pool at the local swim/tennis club. Evie's father is one of the club's coaches so she spends her long summer days reading novels in a storage closet whilst cooling off with popsicles. But, when teen queen Annabel's murder sets the tight knit community on edge, Evie decides to harness her inner Harriet the Spy (one of her idols) and crack the case. By trailing, er eavesdropping on, detective Ashlock, Evie manages to generate a fair amount of information but, alas! no resolution. The ante is upped through a spiral of events putting Evie's own life in danger. Told from the point of view of her best friend, Chelsea, the reader is given a detailed glimpse into the inner workings of Evie's

transformation from resident bookworm to heroine.

The real discovery here lies in the revealing of Chelsea's true identity. I had a true Homer Simpson 'Doh!' moment about halfway through the novel when I realized just who Chelsea was. I won't spoil it for you but let's just say, those who know me well are going to be mighty surprised I actually liked the book given the circumstances.

Maureen Lubitz says

Originally posted on

I received a copy of this book from Netgalley/the publisher in exchange for an honest review.

My oldest daughter is nine years old, and she and I are very fortunate to have received the opportunity to read ARCs of some middle grade books. When I first read the synopsis of Sara Hammel's *The Underdogs*, I knew that I would like it, but I wasn't sure how my daughter would react. She tends to be a sensitive soul, but we had enjoyed reading *Isabel Feeney, Star Reporter*, so I gave it a shot.

Chelsea and Evie are best friends, who spend their days together at a tennis club. Chelsea's mom works at the front desk, and Evie's dad is a tennis pro. Their club is rocked to its core when one of the most popular members is found murdered. Annabel Harper was beautiful and vivacious, and did not seem to have any enemies. Chelsea and Evie are stunned, and they decide that it's up to them to help the police solve the case. As they follow the detective around the club, the two girls discover that the club holds many secrets- but none of these secrets seem to lead the girls any closer to discovering who could have killed Annabel.

The Underdogs is so much more than a murder mystery. Over the course of the summer, Chelsea and Evie discover more about themselves. Evie is bullied by some of the kids at the club, and tries to figure out where her strengths lie. Likewise, Chelsea comes to terms with events that happened in her past.

That said, the mystery was satisfying and surprising. There's also a twist that you won't see coming. This is a middle grade book, so it's appropriate for readers in the later years of elementary school and middle school too. The material isn't too graphic, and there certainly aren't any implications that anything untoward happened to Annabel before she was killed. My daughter did get a little scared during one scene, but as I mentioned, she does get scared easily.

I would absolutely recommend *The Underdogs*. My daughter and I read this together most evenings, and it took a great deal of self-control not to read ahead after she went to bed. I appreciated that this book was about more than just the mystery; it gave my daughter and me an opportunity to talk about bullying. There's also a twist that neither of us saw coming. This is a stunning debut, and we are looking forward to reading more books by Sara Hammel in the future.

Ansi Widya says

What a lovely twist!

Angie says

Pretty girl Annabel is found dead at the local tennis club. Best friends Evie and Chelsea are fixtures at the club since their parents both work there. Because they hang out at the club all day they are aware of a lot of what is going on, but they have no idea who killed Annabel. Evie and Chelsea start stalking the detective investigating the case. They listen in while he interviews people and they do a bit of sleuthing of their own. They are also dealing with their own issues. Evie was recently given to her dad when her mom wanted to "find herself" and he isn't the best parent. Evie is a bit overweight and spends a lot of time hiding from the tennis club bullies who pick on her. Chelsea has recently been adopted by her new mom, but still has issues because of a trauma she suffered in the past.

I am a bit torn on this book. I enjoyed the mystery aspect of it and how Evie and Chelsea were able to investigate without ever leaving the club. I liked the fact that there were a bunch of red herrings in the suspects and you were never really sure who killed Annabel because so many people seem to be good suspects. What I didn't really like was the fact that Evie is suddenly a tennis prodigy or the twist with Chelsea. Throughout the book you wonder why Chelsea never talks, but if you are like me you just assumed it was because of the past trauma. It's not. The twist is unexpected, at least it was to me. Not sure how I felt about it. It did make me want to reread the book and see if I could spot it earlier though.

I received this book from Netgalley.

Sam says

*****SPOILER ALERT*****

I devoured this book in a day (and being a full-time working mom of two young boys, this alone is amazing to me!) I loved the friendship between the girls -- the loyalty of Chelsea to her best friend, Evie, and the realness and RAWNESS of Evie's character. The bullying of Evie and the abuse Chelsea endured were painful to read but struck a chord -- I love when books do that. Hammel's writing took me right back to grade school -- the meanness, cruelty, heartlessness that Evie experiences from some of her peers is both truthful and heartbreaking. Readers will see a struggling, overweight, teased, and forgotten "underdog" in Evie and the best part about her transformation is that the focus is on getting her **HEALTHY** and **ACTIVE** (vs. changing who she is, or trying to get "skinny", or apologize for her shortcomings). I think this is so well done, not at all preachy, and will resonate with so many young girls during such a crappy time of life. On lighter notes, I laughed out loud a few times and often felt like I was in the club myself -- the characters and setting were well narrated. I was spellbound by the mystery and literally had to will myself not to skip to the end of the book to find out the ending. Now that I've read it once, it's definitely something I need to read again knowing what I know. A brilliant debut novel!

Mrs. says

Wow! While this book was a good murder mystery read, I was blown away by the twist at the end. I won't give away the ending. Read it for yourself!

Jana says

I had the opportunity to read a digital ARC of this book from NetGalley in exchange for this review. I have to say that this is just a terrific book for the start of my Summer of Reading! This is a juicy, summertime mystery that definitely has a surprise twist at the end! I thought that it would be pretty difficult to surprise me with a middle grade mystery (I am an experienced educator with a graduate degree), but I'll admit that I was already 90% through the book and thought I knew the answers to everything, before I figured out something VERY important about one of the main characters!

The book opens with the discovery of a sixteen-year-old girl's body at the side of the swimming pool of an advanced competitive tennis club in a suburb of Boston. Nobody is quite certain what exactly happened, but a police detective begins investigating immediately. There are plenty of suspicious characters around at this club, and twelve-year-old Evie and Chelsea are snooping around trying to get to the bottom of the mystery themselves.

To read my entire review: <http://janatheteacher.blogspot.com/20...>

Ella Spear says

Two best-friends, Evie and Chelsea, both young girls, set out to solve the murder of a popular local teen girl named Annabel Harper during summer break. Chelsea is the sweetest, most caring character you'd ever meet. She's outgoing and only wants what best for everyone. She's very athletic and loves a good adventure. She has a big heart and is the most easy-to-love character. Her narration really gives you the perfect picture of what life is like at the club. Evie is very shy and insecure about almost everything about herself. She is very friendly though when you get to meet her. She's sympathetic for other people and always tries to comfort them. But she has troubles with her body.

When the news gets around that the body of 16-year old Annabel is found at the country club pool, everyone is shocked and very sorrowful. No one could ever imagine why someone would do this to her. She was the most perfect girl, smart, beautiful, nice, everyone adored her. Everyone sees her murder as just plain out sickening and ghastly, all except two specific people, which you'd learn about later. And that's where the story begins. Everything was normal at a nice tennis club in Boston, where pro tennis players practice and rich families are members at, until Annabel's death. It shook everyone, especially her wonderful brother Nicholas, that everyone also loved to the bone. With Detective Ashlock, a mysterious man who is pretty friendly but very stern, on the case, everyone worries the killer is still out there. Evie and Chelsea get right on the case, eavesdropping, snooping around the club, doing anything they can to find clues. Everyone is a suspect. Lots of weird things start happening, not only with setting, but the people at the club as well.

Detective Ashlock finds a "mystery item" that end up playing a big part in the murder. A girl named Lisa, who everyone kind of hates, seems to be one the biggest suspect right now, being that she always compared herself to Annabel and was always very jealous. She left mean notes in Annabel's locker and even worse stuff. Another big suspect is Goran, a Russian tennis player who had a "thing" with Annabel. He is very kind though and was definitely "devastated" when he found out Annabel was dead. He was also supposedly there the night she died. Another one of the biggest suspects was a boy named Patrick, who was obsessed with Annabel, but when he found out she was in love with Goran, he took a dark turn. Evie starts to play tennis, and gets in shape. She got bullied from being "fat" and was always eating. She becomes a great tennis

player, and Chelsea is there to watch. Lisa actually gets framed and sent to jail for a little bit, but then someone clears it up, that she's not the killer. But then that means the killer is still out and about. We learn that Evie and Chelsea both came from horrible pasts, where Evie got deserted by her mother, and put with her dad, Lucky, a pro tennis player, who always forgets about her. And Chelsea was horrendously abused but finally taken away and adopted by a kind women, Beth. Towards the end of the story, you start to realize something isn't right with Chelsea. Evie knows it too. As they get closer and closer to solving the mystery, they find out the killer is someone they know, and love, and was hiding under their noses the whole time, and ends up shooting one of the main characters, your favorite character out of extreme anger and mental problems. And if you thought it couldn't get any worse, the unbelievable happens, something you would never see coming, something that changes your whole perspective and what you thought you knew. If you thought you had a good idea about what was going on in the book, you're wrong. Something happens to Chelsea, and someone goes mad with a gun, and from there, it takes an insane turn. Believe me, you would've never guessed.

Aside of all the crazy things that happen in this book, it's a fantastic mystery, fun adventure, humorous, and very realistic book. Even a little scary when you read it at night. By far, one of the best books I've read in a long time.

Joe says

This review contains spoilers, but I have hidden them. Seriously: if you intend on reading this book, **do not read the spoilers.**

"This is a book that takes a chance and will genuinely surprise readers." - *Booklist*

"...readers' feelings... will depend on whether they're delighted or annoyed by the surprise ending." - *Kirkus*

"...mystery lovers will want to go back and read it all again to find the hidden clues." - *School Library Journal*

I'm not usually drawn to middle grade mysteries. They tend to lack bite, so in my Middle School Library Readers' Advisory Skills, I am greatly lacking in the mystery department. But after reading the reviews for Sara Hammel's *The Underdogs*, I was beyond intrigued.

I regretted this decision by page 100. *The Underdogs* was a drag. Though the murder happens immediately, the book is decidedly character-driven, which I often like. But when I'm reading a mystery, I want a fast pace, loads of suspense, and shocking turns. But Hammel doesn't deliver any of these. By page 200, I was struggling, and was complaining endlessly to my partner about what a slog the novel was. I couldn't imagine giving this book more than 2 stars, though I was closer to 1 star. It was just *so* sluggish and, with the exception of Evie, the characters were flat and indistinguishable. And some of the narrator's observations were just flat-out weird and jarring; I started to wonder if middle grade readers would be confounded. God knows I was.

And then, twenty-five pages from the ending, the twist happened.

Seriously, Bert. That was my reaction.

I stormed out to the balcony, where my partner was reading. "David!" I bellowed, "The [observation

redacted] is [observation redacted]!"

He burst out laughing.

I was *pissed*.

PISSED.

It felt like an enormous rip-off, and I almost threw the book off the balcony.

"How did Hammel blindside me?" I wondered. "Was I *that* dense? Did I *really* miss something that big?"

So I flipped through the first 285 pages, re-reading moments in the book that popped out as curious.

Nope. The clues are all there, but they are *so* subtle that it is really tough not to admire the chutzpah of Hammel. It's almost audacious what she gets away with.

(view spoiler)

So for that reason - this big ole twist that the review publications trumpeted - and the sheer brilliance in which Hammel pulls it off with almost near air-tightness, I can't give it anything less than three stars.

I can't wait to see what my students think of it.

UPDATE

Omfg, there's a (view spoiler) on the back cover of the book!!!

Annette says

THE UNDERDOGS by Sara Hammel is an exciting murder mystery with an unexpected twist.

When popular teen Annabel Harper is murdered at an elite tennis club, Evie and her best friend Chelsea set out to find the killer. From spying on the lead detective to conducting their own informal investigation, the two are intent on solving the crime.

Librarians will find youth re-reading this middle grade book looking for hidden clues to the book's amazing twist. Ask readers to take a pledge of silence so they don't give away the unexpected reveal near the end of the book. Although the mystery itself will be enough to keep most readers happy, it's the unique twist that will keep this title circulating.

To learn more about the author, go to <http://www.sarahammelbooks.com/>.

Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux an imprint of Macmillan on May 31, 2016. ARC courtesy of the publisher.

Kathy Martin says

Well, we were told twice in the book description that a twist was coming. Even so, this twist took me by surprise and had me looking back through the book for clues.

It begins with a murder. Popular teen Annabel Harper is found dead by the pool of the athletic club. Twelve-year-old Evie and her friend Chelsea hang out at the club every day. Chelsea's mom mans the reception desk and Evie's dad is one of the teaching tennis pros. Both are easily overlooked. Chelsea is accepted by everyone but Evie has a harder time. Her mom dropped her off like an unwanted parcel with the father who didn't know she existed. He is at a loss about what to do with her. His parenting style seems to be a combination of benign neglect spiced with careless, hurtful remarks. Evie is a little overweight and self-conscious about it. It doesn't help that one of the tennis campers has made her his victim of choice for constant harassment.

When Annabel is murdered, Evie and Chelsea begin to follow the detective around and spend a lot of time listening in on conversations they shouldn't be hearing. There are plenty of suspects. Is it the jealous girl who has lost numerous boys to Annabel? Is it one of Annabel's admirers? The lifeguard who has watched her from afar? One of the two boys who are best friends and elite tennis players whose friendship is threatened when they both fall for her?

Chelsea is the narrator of the story and we gather bits and pieces of her story. She has recently been adopted after escaping a very abusive situation - a situation that has left her with physical injuries that are permanent. Her abusers have never been caught. But despite her past, she is happy with her new mother and has a surprisingly upbeat attitude. Her main worries are for her friend Evie.

This story was exciting and fast-paced. And that final twist... Read it and find out!

Peggy says

Holy smokes what a good, twisty book! Thanks to the ARC from Goodreads, I can be one of the first to attest to how layered and intriguing this book is. There are mysteries within mysteries and a truly satisfying twist at the end--READ TO THE END! The friendship between Evie and Chelsea is strong and compelling; I wanted to follow these two amateur sleuths around for sure as they try to put the pieces together about Annabel's murder (not a spoiler--this happens in the first chapter). This book moves beyond your typical mystery to make points about other topics, too: bullying, weight obsession, friendship, absent parents, and more. It's ambitious but not preachy, and I found myself gasping, chuckling, and wiping away a stray tear or two (or more) at various intervals. And the clue's about Chelsea's own mysterious, horrific backstory were good as well with a heck of a payoff in that area.

The tennis club setting was played up to the hilt and the range of characters portrayed definitely keeps you invested. I could tell who these people were, especially people like Lisa and Tad and Lucky and Will.

Overall not just a great mystery but a great story about characters you want to keep hanging out with. I just wanted to hug Evie, and don't get me started on Chelsea! Pick up this book and get ready to be entertained!

Nina says

3,5/5

It was a fun read. At first it was a bit confusing with Before and After. But it got interesting.
