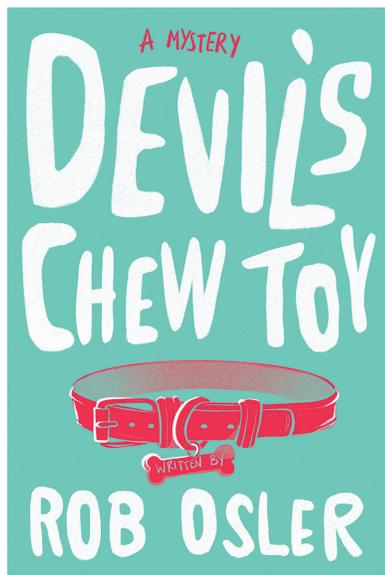


devil's CHEW TOY

Media Info SHEET



BOOK TITLE:
Devil's Chew Toy

SERIES TITLE:
A Hayden & Friends
Mystery (Book One)

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STORY TEASER

Gay, twenty-something school teacher and part-time blogger Hayden McCall is in trouble. The night's date is missing, and the police think he has something to do with it. With help from new friends—Hollister, a what-you-see-is-what-you-got-a-problem? Black lesbian, and Burley, a stoner-baker giant—Hayden searches for the truth and the missing guy. But just staying alive is a tricky business when the enemy plays to kill.

STORY DESCRIPTION

Seattle teacher and part-time blogger Hayden McCall wakes up in a stranger's bed alone, half-naked and sporting one hell of a shiner. Then the police come knocking on the door. It seems that Latino dancer Camilo Rodriguez has gone missing, and they suspect foul play. What happened the night before? And where is Camilo?

Determined to find answers, Hayden seeks out two of Camilo's friends—Hollister and Burley—both lesbians and both fiercely devoted to their friend. From them, Hayden learns that Camilo is a "Dreamer" whose parents had been deported years earlier, and whose sister, Daniela, is presumed to have returned to Venezuela with them. Convinced that the cops won't take a brown boy's disappearance seriously, the girls join Hayden's hunt for Camilo.

The first clues turn up at Barkingham Palace, a pet store where Camilo had taken a part-time job. The store's owner, Della Rupert, claims ignorance, but Hayden knows something is up. And then there's

Camilo's ex-boyfriend, Ryan, who's suddenly grown inexplicably wealthy. When Hayden and Hollister follow Ryan to a secure airport warehouse, they make a shocking connection between him and Della—and uncover the twisted scheme that's made both of them rich.

The trail of clues leads them to the grounds of a magnificent estate on an island in Puget Sound, where they'll finally learn the truth about Camilo's disappearance—and the fate of his family.

AUTHOR Q & A

What made you want to write a traditional mystery featuring gay and lesbian characters?

Quite frankly, I wrote the book I'd like to read. I love mysteries written in the Agatha Christie whodunnit tradition. I read them as a child and enjoyed the game of guessing the villain's identity. So that explains why I chose the traditional mystery genre. As for featuring gay and lesbian characters, I am gay and believe that many LGBTQ+ readers desire more stories that feature characters like themselves. Okay, perhaps not exactly like them (is there really anyone like Burley?). But you get my point.

The main protagonist, although being gay, could have been straight and the core of the story would need not have changed. Was that intentional?

As Hayden might say, "Yes! One thousand percent, yes!" I set out to write a book in which the stars of the show are gay or lesbian in the same casual manner that most stories feature straight, white characters. The story doesn't require that Hayden or Hollister or Burley do queer things (whatever those might be). They simply are who they are. Being gay is just one facet of them—a consequential part, for sure—but it alone does not define them.

Why did you make the characters so... quirky?

I'll take quirky, happily. Though, I hope the reader will find the oddball cast entertaining. Again—and it will keep coming back to this—I wrote the type of book that I want to read. And just like anyone else who cracks open a novel, I am looking to be entertained. That said, it is a careful balance to bring each character to life memorably and distinctively without turning them into a caricature. Some of my cast may be over the top, but it's crucial that they not lose their humanity. A reader must find something about them relatable—not always or necessarily likable. And it's vital that, at least by the story's conclusion, we understand their motivations.

Why set your story in Seattle?

I lived in Seattle for nearly twenty years. I know it well; I love it mightily. It's a big city with unique flavor and charm, and its many distinct neighborhoods, hills, waterways, and, of course, Elliott Bay provide fantastic terrain for Hayden to crisscross during his 300-plus-page adventure.

The friendship between a timid gay guy and confident lesbian anchors the story. Why?

In the novel, soon after Hayden meets Hollister for the first time, he says that he likes big personalities as they balance out his own. I am a somewhat reserved person, and like Hayden, I enjoy someone who naturally takes the role of instigator and conversation driver. Also, some of my longest and dearest friendships are with women. I wanted to celebrate that dynamic and explore it on the page as Hayden and Hollister grow to trust one another and develop a friendship that, in the end, has them put their lives on the line for each other.

Hayden has a blog. Was that crucial from the start? Or did you add it somewhere along the way?

Mates On Dates, Hayden's blog, came into being somewhere during the initial draft. Hayden is not a hunky heart-throb (though I do hope readers find him loveable). Hayden is like countless young adults who drag themselves out to clubs or scan through profiles on apps searching for love. His blog is a handy tool to allow him to show that side of himself. He is lonely but hopeful; he's sensitive but stronger than he thinks. At heart, Hayden is a romantic. It is important to me as a writer that the reader comes to admire his heart more than his hot bod. And so, I intentionally did not give Hayden model looks or a six-pack. The gay fiction world is brimming with naked torsos as cover art. I'm not knocking the gay romance genre, but that is not the story I wanted to write. If I've been successful, Devil's Chew Toy will be viewed as a novel about friendships, optimism, and love.

Was there a benefit to having an animal play a main character?

I've always lived with animals. I love them immeasurably. Currently, my partner and I share our home with a tall gray cat named Andy Action Cat or, as I tend to call him, Mr. Chomps. Including Commander, the dog in the tale, happened without strategic thought. And yet, Commander's presence solved a lot of plot challenges. For one, the reader has little time with Camilo in the story, but he must be likable—otherwise, the reader may not care about his rescue. His kindness to Commander does that efficiently. Secondly, Commander provides key plot points that trigger Hayden's actions and propel the story.

One character is a DREAMER, aka protected by his DACA status? Why include that?

Much like Hayden is gay, among other things, and Hollister and Burley are lesbians, among other things, I wanted that character's DACA status to be among the many aspects of his life—not the one defining facet of his being. In society, we make a mistake when we focus solely on one characteristic of a person and, upon that, draw a heap of conclusions about them. Not only does that usually end up being wildly inaccurate, but it also doesn't help create a happy, vibrant community.

There is a ninety-year-old character in the book. Tell us about Hayden's friendship with him.

Diversity includes age. It was important to me that Hayden's world include an elderly person. Jerry, the old guy in the story, is essential. Jerry not only guides Hayden as he unravels the riddle of the crime, but he provides Hayden with a safe space and a shoulder to cry on. Jerry reminds Hayden—and the reader—that life is short, fragile, and that our actions speak to the kind of persons we are.

What's next? Can readers expect more from Hayden & Friends?

Absolutely! Up next is eau du Venom. Book Two in the Hayden & Friends series features Burley, the lovable giant, more prominently. When Burley's childhood friend, Kennedy Osaka, visits Seattle, Burley finds the A-List social influencer dead in her hotel suite and becomes the cop's top suspect. If Hayden and Hollister are to save their friend, they must find Kennedy's real killer. But in an online world where image is everything, not everything is as it appears, and no one, as it turns out, is to be trusted.