



***THE BROOMSTICK BIKE* BY VERONICA BENNETT**

About the book

The Broomstick Bike is an adventure story touched with magic. Eleven-year-old Zack Mosel is staying with his eccentric grandma, ‘Mag the Hag’, as he calls her, because his parents have gone away. Not on a holiday, but on a mission to the eastern European country of Slovodnia, where Mag comes from, to try and get the Mosel family’s motorbike factory back from the people who have taken it over illegally. When his mum and dad disappear, Zack and Mag set off to rescue them – on a fifty-year-old motorcycle.

As they journey across Europe, they are aided by several new friends, who seem wary of what is happening in Slovodnia, and advise them to be careful. When Zack and his grandma are stopped at the border, the broomstick bike – which seems to have a mind of its own – gets them across. But more danger awaits. It seems that Yuris Mosel, a villainous relative of Mag’s who has seized ownership of the factory, has no intention of letting it go without a fight. But he has not reckoned with the powers of the broomstick bike. Magic and mayhem ensue, during which Zack begins to realize how much his family means to him, especially his weird and witchy grandma.

About the author

Veronica Bennett is the author of more than twenty books for children and young adults. She was an English teacher for many years, having graduated with a master’s degree in English from the University of Wales Cardiff. In 2011 she was elected a Hawthornden Fellow, and spent a month at the writers’ retreat run by the Hawthornden Foundation in Scotland. She is married to an economics professor, has two adult children and lives in London. For more information about Veronica and her books, visit her website at www.veronica-bennett.com

BEFORE YOU READ...

Look at the cover of the book.

- Jot down three things you see or notice on the cover.
- Offer two thoughts based on what you see.
- Identify one question you would like answered.



EXPLORING THE BOOK

Setting

Slovodnia is not a real place, and it is smaller than most Eastern European countries. It lies beyond the mountains in the south-east corner of Germany, somewhere between Austria and the Czech Republic. It is explained in the book that Slovodnia was part of the area under Communist control until the regime fell, but even though the government has changed, the country is still struggling with corruption, crime and poverty.

Though touched on very simply in the novel, this setting may provide an introduction to the subject of oppressive versus democratic governments, for children old enough to grasp the concept.

Themes

Exile

Mag and her husband, Zack's grandfather, escaped across the Slovodnian border to the West approximately forty years previously, when they were newly married. Zack's father, Alex, was born in the West, and has never been to Slovodnia. His parents did not speak Slovodnian to him as he grew up, because they didn't think Alex would ever be able to go there. At the beginning of the story, Zack's granddad has died, without ever seeing his country again.

Ideas for discussion:

- What are the influences on Alex Mosel's decision to try to get the motorcycle factory back?
- When Zack and Mag arrive in Slovodnia, why does Mag kiss the ground?
- In Slovodnia, Zack meets Maria, Mag's sister's granddaughter. Why have Maria's parents had to go away?

Corruption and crime

Slovodnia is in the grip of gangsters, and it is hinted that the government is corrupt (p.69). The border guard is in the pay of Yuris, who bribes corruptible officials. But the honesty of the policeman, the other Alex, shows that the force for good also exists in Slovodnian public servants.



Ideas for discussion:

- What is bribery?
- How has the dishonesty of the people in power affected ordinary Slovodnians like Julia and her husband Peter? For example, why haven't they got much petrol? Why are the children in the village barefoot?

The journey

It is only when Zack goes on a difficult, dangerous journey with Mag that he realizes what she is really like. His experiences also make him understand more about himself, and how much his family means to him.

Ideas for discussion:

- How does Mag show she loves Zack?
- Does he love her?
- How do Zack's feelings about his family differ at the end of the book from the beginning?
- Why does Mag insist that she and Zack clean the motorcycle together at the end, even though the police car cleaner offers to do it?

Belief versus scientific fact

Zack and Mag are guided by a blind man (p.38), and Zack learns to trust his senses (p.54, p.89-90). When the bike does seemingly impossible things, Mag tells Zack to believe, even if he can't understand (p.58). Later, he applies the same apparently illogical argument when he is begging the policeman to believe him (p.103). Contrasted with this is Zack's interest in science and space travel, as well as his ability to solve practical problems. The voice of Zack's late granddad is invoked to show how Zack learnt factual things from him, and we also find out that Zack's father has taught him to orienteer using a compass.

Ideas for discussion:

- How and why are Zack and Mag mistaken about Gunter when they first see him?
- Would things have been different if Zack didn't believe?
- What might be the writer's intention in calling the final chapter 'Magic'?