

The Secrets of Room 209



By Rupak Bhattacharya
Illustrated by Chris Jones

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: The Mind Reader	4
Chapter Two: In Search of Aliens	12
Chapter Three: The Grand Experiment	16
Chapter Four: Space Day	20
About Us	28

Chapter One



The Mind Reader

“Arun, did you know it takes Saturn almost 30 years to circle the sun?” asks Ms. Deng. “Isn’t that amazing? Plus, it has those beautiful rings around it. It’s definitely my favorite planet.”

I lean over to my best friend, Marisa. “She did it again!”

That was the third time Ms. Deng read my mind today. We just learned that it takes Earth one year to circle the sun. I was wondering how long it takes Saturn when she answered my question before I asked!



“Maybe she just wants you to stop staring out the window and pay attention,” whispers Marisa.

Marisa is really smart. She can explain almost anything. But this time, I think she is wrong.

“OK, class,” says Ms. Deng. “Break into your teams to work on your Space Day projects. I can’t wait to see what you create.”



Space Day was Ms. Deng's idea. We'll be making projects about space that will be on display in the gym. Marisa is my teammate, which is great because we both love the planets. When she grows up, she wants to bring pieces of Mars back to Earth and study them. I just want to live on Mars. I also want to spend some time on Venus, Jupiter, Uranus, and all the other planets, too!





“Ms. Deng knows so much about space. It’s like she has been there,” I say. A scary thought hits me. “What if she is an alien spy who can read minds?”

“What?” Marisa asks.

“Maybe she is pretending to be a teacher so she can study us humans,” I say. “This might be part of the perfect alien plan to take over Earth!”

“I don’t think so, Arun,” says Marisa. “We need to decide what we are going to do for Space Day.” She taps her desk for a moment. Then, she says, “I have an idea! We could...”

Before Marisa can finish, Ms. Deng comes up behind us. She says, “How would the two of you like to make a large painting of Saturn? I want to make sure at least one group presents my favorite planet.”

Marisa's eyes go wide. She doesn't answer, so I answer for us. "Sure, Ms. Deng. That sounds fun."

"Great!" says Ms. Deng, and she walks over to another group of students.



I turn to Marisa. “Everything OK?”

“A painting of Saturn was my idea.” Marisa looks scared. “She...she read my mind.”



Chapter Two



In Search of Aliens

Marisa and I head to the library after school. We flip through book after book about aliens, UFOs, and distant galaxies. I find out that there's stuff called *dark matter*. It makes up most of the universe. The only thing is, we can't see it with our eyes!

“Dark matter must be how the aliens hide their spaceships,” I tell Marisa.

“Maybe. Or they are shape-shifters who look like humans.” She holds up a book with a picture of an alien putting on a human skin like it's a coat.



“Gross!” I yell.

The librarian gives me a mean stare. So does the man sitting across from us. What if they are alien spies, too? Do they know Ms. Deng? What if Space Day is really just a way to hide an alien invasion?

Marisa taps me. “Arun, I think I found the right one.” She holds up a book titled *How to Detect Aliens*.



We start reading about a test you can do to find out if someone is an alien. I keep my eye on the librarian and the man, too. We can't let them know our plan.

And we definitely have a plan.



Chapter Three



The Grand Experiment

The next day at school, Marisa and I set up the grand experiment. The book says that aliens are allergic to sugar. They can't even stand being near it. So before school starts, I head into our empty classroom with a bag of sugar. I pour a whole bunch of it under Ms. Deng's desk.

Marisa keeps watch to make sure nobody comes in. I even pour a little sugar in my classmates' desks in case any of them are aliens wearing kid skins. Eek!







Marisa and I high-five each other. The trap is set!

During class, I pay close attention to Ms. Deng. But nothing happens. She seems the same, except she still knows way too much about space to be a human. Did you know Saturn has 82 moons? It's the planet with the most moons in our solar system. Crazy stuff.

We come back from lunch to a disaster. The whole room is crawling with ants! They are everywhere! On our desks, on our chairs, even up our legs. Yikes! I guess I forgot that ants like sugar, too.

“How did all this sugar get in here?”

Ms. Deng asks. Marisa and I look at each other, but we don't say a word. I cross my fingers and hope for the best.



Chapter Four



Space Day

It's Space Day. The class follows Ms. Deng into the gym with our space projects. Our painting of Saturn turned out OK, but I'm too nervous to think about that right now.

“Well, this is it,” I say. “It's been really nice having you as my best friend.”

“What if the aliens are friendly? Maybe they just want to share what they know,” Marisa says.

I sure hope she is right.









We put our painting on display and check out the other kids' projects. We learn so many cool things!

We walk over to our classmate David. "Did you know that Earth is just the right distance from the sun for humans to survive?" he asks. "It's not too warm or too cold."

"That's why they say Earth is in the 'Goldilocks Zone,'" says a teacher I haven't seen before. "A perfect place to call home." He looks around the room, squinting. Is he an alien, too?

I turn to Marisa, terrified. "What if the aliens need our planet because it's the only place where they can survive?" I whisper.

"Maybe we should ask Ms. Deng and get the truth," Marisa suggests. She is so brave.

I look around. “Wait, where is Ms. Deng?” I don’t see her anywhere. “Oh no! She must be getting ready for the invasion!”

Marisa and I hold hands. “OK, Arun, if we run as fast as we can, maybe we can make it to the door,” she says.



I nod. We both take a deep breath and get ready.

Just then, the gym doors swing open. Ms. Deng enters with a stranger. Is it another alien?



“Students,” calls Ms. Deng, “please gather around. I’d like you to meet Ms. Gale Walker. She is an astronaut who has been to space. She is also my best friend. She would love to answer any questions you might have.”

Marisa and I turn to each other. “Her best friend is an astronaut?” Marisa asks.



“Wow, Ms. Deng isn’t an alien! She just really, really loves space,” I say.

We both run to meet Ms. Walker. Marisa probably wants to ask if our moon is the same as Saturn’s moons. And you know what? I think that’s my question, too!



About Us

The Author

Rupak Bhattacharya is a New Yorker who loves stories, people, and anything that brings those two things together. This book is dedicated to his kids, who have invaded his heart like aliens from outer space.

The Illustrator

Chris Jones has been illustrating for children for over 10 years. He has a passion for visual storytelling, and his work can be found in picture books, graphic novels, and magazines. He lives in Toronto, Canada, and he reads books with his two children as often as possible. See more of Chris's work at www.mrjonesey.com.

Book Club Questions

1. What makes Arun think Ms. Deng is an alien?
2. How does Arun feel about aliens?
3. How are Arun and Marisa similar to or different from each other?
4. Why do Arun and Marisa do an experiment? How does it turn out?

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