



STARRED REVIEW

Digger: Dig or Die!

Deborah Cholette; illustrated by Davide Ortu

One Elm Books, 240 pages, (hardcover) \$18.99, 9781643713991

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In Deborah Cholette's compelling middle grade novel, two siblings team with neighborhood kids to save their families after a catastrophic climate-change event leaks the earth's atmosphere into space, leaving only enough oxygen to survive in low-altitude areas.

This cli-fi (climate science fiction) story has an appealing dual-protagonist narrative and a table-turning "adults broke it, but kids will fix it" plot. Nick and Lily miss Dad, who left home a year ago for a construction project in New York. "He was the best digger around," Nick says, "operating big backhoes." To impress Dad, Nick dug a tunnel from his basement bedroom to the 50-foot-deep ravine behind the neighborhood; Mom, a single-parent supermarket employee, is too overwhelmed to notice.

When the climate catastrophe hits, Mom loads her car with groceries, Nick reveals his underground dugout, and the family hides food there. Soldiers evacuating the area spray a "Red-Line," indicating life (breathable oxygen) below or death (insufficient oxygen) above.

Nick and Lily network with other remaining neighbors to dig tunnels, set up a walkie-talkie system, and use the low-lying ravine for travel, safety, communication, and gatherings. Tension mounts, though, as the Red-Line keeps dropping, a violent gun-toting neighbor steals food and oxygen tanks, and food deliveries promised by soldiers are delayed.

This is a fast-paced story with themes that expand beyond climate change to include social issues such as bullying, mental health, and gun violence. Cholette gives meaningful roles to black and Asian-American secondary characters and creates a strong female character in Lily. Davide Ortu's crisp illustrations individuate these characters, enhancing the storytelling.

Additionally, the author smartly uses the Red-Line conceit to ensure kids take the lead in community-building, as they can hunch, crawl, and move within the lower safe oxygen levels better than adults. This advantage creates opportunities for the kids to innovate and creatively collaborate.

As the story unwinds, the action reaches a fever pitch. Young readers will find this a (pun intended) breathtaking, page-turning read.