



The Case of the Crying Signpost, by Tom Xavier

Age Range: 9-12

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Twelve-year-old Gwendolyn Morgana Melcham—better known as Nelly—shares a story of daring and adventure, intrigue and voodoo, racism and America in the early twentieth century. The year is 1937. Nelly has received word that she is to join her father, a ship's captain, in Puerto Rico for vacation. The first leg of her journey, from Chicago to Miami by train, goes off without a hitch.

Then, while she is waiting for her mother's pilot friend to ready their aircraft, Nelly spies an unusual piece of luggage that leads to a surprising encounter and a most urgent sidebar for her travel. Inside the luggage is six-inch-tall detective Tim Morcombe. In spite of his short stature, Morcombe is a world-renowned detective and has been summoned by the governor of Louisiana to help with an important case. A woman named Millie MacLaren is missing, and it is a matter of life or death! But where is the plane Tim was to meet? With her father delayed a week by damage to his ship, quick-witted Nelly decides she has just enough time to help her new friend and traveling companion get to New Orleans and find the missing person. After a bumpy landing, the pair launch their investigation. Will they be able to solve the case in time? Morcombe's deductive abilities are second to none, and his diminutive stature is an asset in allowing him to observe others without being seen. Nelly is an essential ally for him in navigating New Orleans, asking incisive questions, and sorting out allies from enemies.

Xavier's history-infused mystery features an appealing pre-teen lead, a clever detective, and some of the best features of the genre: peril, family secrets, greed, conspiracies, and a satisfying bad-guys-unmasked conclusion. It is a compelling and enjoyable story that readers will be tempted to consume in one sitting. Like Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, this is told from the perspective of an engaged—and engaging—detective assistant. Fans of Turnage's "Three Times Lucky" series or LaFever's "Theodosia" series will find Nelly's narratorial voice particularly appealing. Xavier's text does seem to leave open the possibility of a sequel, and readers will be hoping for one.