

# TITLE INFORMATION

**SWALLOWED BY A SECRET**

Risa Nyman

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# BOOK REVIEW

In Nyman’s middle-grade debut novel, a 12-year-old boy who hears the voice of his late father tries to unravel the mystery of his dad’s death.

After losing his father, Ronald “Rocky” Casson Jr. and his mother leave Whitman, Massachusetts, for Milton. His new town is in the same state and relatively close, but Rocky still has to leave his friends. Having moved during a school year, he suffers new-kid woes, like becoming an easy target for Max the bully. But he quickly finds a friend in Olive, who tutors him in geography. Rocky’s primary worry involves his dad; after overhearing one of this mother’s conversations, he believes she lied to him about how his father died when she claimed his dad’s heart merely stopped. She also doesn’t want Rocky visiting Whitman, even to sign up for the summer soccer clinic there, and hasn’t given him a satisfying explanation for why he has to avoid the town. His father’s voice, however, which suddenly and regularly pops up in his head, tells him that answers lie in Whitman. Rocky ultimately confides in Olive, who concocts clever plans, including a way to sneak a peek at his file in the school counselor’s office. But after Rocky finally decides to return to his hometown, he braves a two-hour bike ride that will prove arduous and, Olive fears, dangerous as well. Nyman’s engaging tale features two immensely likable characters in Rocky and Olive. Though headstrong, savvy Olive is the standout, Rocky is a relatable protagonist, as his occasional peevishness is understandable. With Rocky’s goal established early, the story moves at a steady clip. Even a subplot (involving a camping trip with his uncle that leads to an emergency) neither feels extraneous nor decelerates the pace. In his charming first-person narrative, Rocky effortlessly drops quotable passages: “Monday mornings wouldn’t be such a drag if school started on Tuesdays.” Meanwhile, the father’s voice, though he insists he’s no ghost, is largely open to interpretation. And though most readers will decipher what Rocky’s mom is hiding from him, the ending is dramatically satisfying.

Sensational tween characters propel this lighthearted but sentimental tale.

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