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TITLE INFORMATION

SECRET OF THE WARLOCK'S CRYPT

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BOOK REVIEW

A 12-year-old working with his uncle, a historian, unearths clues to an old, macabre unsolved mystery while searching for a deceased millionaire's missing artifacts in this middle-grade novel.

Mike Hilliard works alongside his uncle Robert "Otto" Hilliard, an employee of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland. Otto's research into the life and death of the ruthless Titus Morley attracts the attention of Lawrence Piddle, a professor of religion at Dartmouth College, but Mike begins to suspect Piddle's interest in the case is more than educational, especially after one of Morley's journals under the society's care suddenly goes missing. A priceless collection of masks and books disappeared following Morley's demise in 1872 when his oil refinery exploded. Cryptic drawings, maps and symbols in Morley's voluminous journals lead Mike to the location of Morley's mausoleum. Secretly teaming up with his uncle's colleague Billy Hayworth, Mike pays a late-night visit to the tomb, where he uncovers a secret room in which literally soul-stirring horror awaits. Dedicated to author John Bellairs, Hayes' debut novel offers age-appropriate chills, including death masks, rotted corpses and the walking dead, as well as flashes of mildly queasy terror ("A sickening sound filled Jeremiah's ears: the sound of cracking sticks and crushed hen eggs"). Hayes writes ably about the architecture of the story's pivotal locations, but his main character is inconsistently drawn. Mike is said to like ghost stories, and he perks up at the thought of an adventure, but his reactions suggest he wouldn't be especially eager for thrill chasing. At one point, when his uncle casually mentions body hopping, Mike "choked on his soda and nearly spit it out." And while a tauter pace and more humor would liven things up, a solid foundation has been laid for a series of further adventures with Mike and Otto, as when Otto proclaims, "The Western Reserve Historical Society will get to the bottom of it....Rest assured. We'll get to the bottom of it all."

For young readers who, like Mike, are "always up for a good story, especially an historical one."

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