

How Oliver Olson Changed The World

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Recommended for ages: 6-9

Oliver Olson is an outgoing 3rd grader burdened by his overprotective parents. He is not allowed to do many things that his friends enjoy, such as sleepovers, dangerous games, getting dirty, etc. However, he is used to that lifestyle, and accepts his parent's justification that due to his poor health as a young child, he needs to be protected more than other kids his age. However what annoys Oliver most of all is the way that his parents interfere with his non-dangerous, straightforward school work. The trouble starts when his class begins a space unit. The conflicting forces act on Oliver when he is assigned to make a diorama of the solar system, first, he wants to do a good job to impress the teacher and show his interest in the topic, second, his classmate, Crystal is very heated on the demotion of Pluto from the planets and wants to use the diorama to prove her point, third: his parents, like usual, want to do the whole project for him, fourth: he wants to go to the space themed school sleepover that week, but knows that his parents will not let him. After a difficult session in which his parents argue about the proper structure of the diorama and realize that they do not want to do it, Oliver goes to school dejected; inexplicably, when Crystal is arguing with the teacher, he ends up being partnered with her. They set a date for working on the diorama and thinking about their other assignment: writing up an issue that they think is important and mailing it to a state senator who will speak at a school assembly later that week, they are encouraged to pick an idea that will "change the world". While having to deal with the two commitments, Crystal sees how indecisive Oliver is, but she helps him make the diorama and supports his idea for a law banning parents from helping kids too much with homework. Oliver's mother, who keeps entering the kitchen while the two children are working, suggests her own idea, dealing with the drop off zone outside the school.

The two kids finish the diorama, including Oliver's idea of Pluto looking in from outside the box, surrounded by scientists that do not want him to be called a planet, and are happy with the result. Oliver also turns in his mother's idea for the senator.

The deadline comes and the diorama gets a perfect grade, Oliver's parents are impressed and happy when they find out, so they decide to go to the school assembly. There, they are surprised when the senator speaks about the letter she liked the most, one suggesting that parents helping their children with homework make the system unfair for their children and the others. Crystal had submitted Oliver's idea, everyone is very impressed. Seeing his chance, Oliver decides to ask permission to go to the sleepover and convinces his parents, which enables him to open up about his frustration with their control. In the end, while in the sleepover, Oliver realizes that in a small way, he did change the world.

This book was very deep for something of its kind. The overprotective parents are a common literary trope, but the way that Oliver makes them change, by proving himself through a couple of different successes (adults always appreciate multi-tasking) stands out. Instead of rebelling blindly and butting heads with his parents, Oliver stays calm and quiet, takes his opportunity and accepts help from the other people around him to make a difference in the relationship. I think that this is a very, very good lesson for children, showing how changing things does not always have to be fueled by argument and conflict, and that taking things one step at a time is very useful.

However, I did have an issue with the portrayal of the parents; in the end, when Oliver talks to them about his concerns, the father changes his mind too easily (which does not fit with the rest of his character) and the mother is too stubborn. I would have rather depicted them as more collective, so that the gender was not as determinant.

I would recommend this book

Recommended Readings:

Captain Nobody by Dean Pitchford

Clementine series by Sara Pennypacker

Roscoe Riley series by Katherine Applegate