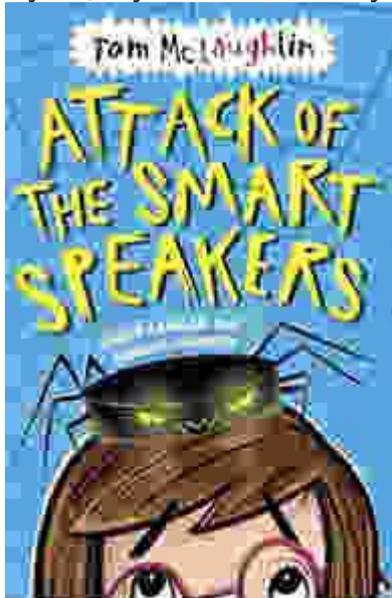# Attack of the Smart Speakers

Tom McLaughlin

Yip, we're back in Tom McLaughlin's Happyville, where anything with claws or bad hair has been removed – including Mrs Bingley from down the road. But don't get too comfy. Even though only cute things like puppies, squirrels and things with big eyes are allowed in this town, danger still rears its head with goose-bumping regularity. Luckily, Happyville has supernerds Tyler, Dylan and Ashley on hand to save the day.

In this outing, the geeky threesome take on a plague of smart speakers. Eager to outsource all that pesky thinking to the new gadgets, Happyville's residents are on a spending spree and drones are dropping Novas all over town. At first, everything seems peachy. Spin classes are organised, TV schedules coordinated, playlists compiled. But these thinly disguised, spidery Alexas soon start threatening Tyler when she questions their motives. Meanwhile, they're mining the data of everyone else in town in order to control lives and feed their own insatiable hunger for information. Will it all end in World Domination, bwa-ha-ha-ha?

Do you see where Tom McLaughlin is going with this? Yes, *Attack of the Smart Speakers* is a great read for ages seven and up, but it also questions our relationship with technology. What happens when you carelessly click that "accept terms and conditions" button? Who has access to personal data and how do they benefit? How reliant are we becoming on AI that tracks our every online move?

And people say funny books don't tackle important stuff. Pff.

McLaughlin prompts young readers growing up in a networked world to ask these questions by prodding their funny bones. It's a technique that works brilliantly and this would make a great book to discuss in any classroom looking at online safety and security issues.

Issues-schmissues. Let's ask the Big Snort Question: is it funny?

Well, if spray-tanned headteachers wearing denim speedos to a communal school dance-a-thon are your thing (and they are mine) you're in for a treat. There are some lovely, hilarious riffs here: on antique-valuing TV shows, badger makeovers, consumer culture and more. Tyler's father, Brian, merits a special mention. Eccentric adults are an essential ingredient of funny children's books and Brian is a headband-wearing, smoothie-glugging, moth-writing corker. McLaughlin's whip-smart eye for dialogue adds to the hilarity. *Attack of the Smart Speakers* is heavy on talking – so much so it could easily be converted to a script - and our geeky girls spark off each other at brilliantly random tangents, which leads their conversations down some winding, barmy, and very funny, paths.

I started this book folding down page corners to mark especially funny lines and passages. By the time I'd reached the end my copy had more dog ears than Crufts.

Attack of the Smart Speakers is giggle-strewn fun with plenty of snort-out-loud moments. McLaughlin winds serious issues into the story lightly, so they aren't extra weight the words have to carry. Illustrated with his own artwork, which makes for a cool-looking package, young readers will be swept along with Tyler, Dylan and Ashley's crazy-nerdy adventures on a wave of laughter.