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High Interest Approachable Vocabulary - Book Review Suspense Series for Tentative Readers

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"A hand was there in the mud. On the hand was a ring with a big red rock. By the hand was a locked bag. It was spooky!"

Thus begins *The Swamp*, Book One of the New Start Suspense Series, a series of six short novels by Patricia Birtwistle that consists of exciting stories of intrigue and suspense. Each story follows the same group of five characters on a new adventure. As with most "high-interest low vocabulary" readers, the content is appealing to most students ages 10 and older, while the author uses shorter sentences and simpler vocabulary typical of a second to third grade reading level.

Each story is divided into short, manageable chapters, and uses a carefully controlled vocabulary and frequently repeated words to reinforce reading success. Included with the set of six paperback novels is a comprehensive Resource Guide that includes story summaries, discussion questions, and a vocabulary list that is sorted by vowel words, word families, and sight words.

I sat down to read these with my 10-year-old autistic son, who currently reads at about a third grade level. He had no trouble with the vocabulary, and the short sentences encouraged his comprehension. The characters are well developed and the stories are fun to read. The story endings cleverly lead into the next story, encouraging the reader to keep reading. Each successive book seemed to use a bit more advanced vocabulary and increasingly complex sentences.

In *The Swamp* the kids find stolen money after being trapped by a rockslide; in *The Old House* they find a lost child. *What a Day* takes the kids swimming at the lake, and *The Junk Yard* finds one character at odds with a guard dog. Our favorite, *The Trip*, is an adventure on horseback, and the final book, *At the Mall*, involves the kids in a back-to-school mystery. The story lines are appropriately suspenseful, though they may be too tense for very young children.

Using the same familiar characters in each book made it easier for my son to follow the storylines. My son had a lot of fun reading these stories, and his sisters found themselves drawn into the suspense as they listened to him read. We all would then join in discussing the events and conclusions. After reading them aloud, my son could be seen reading and enjoying them on his own, too.

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