

'Itch,' by Simon Mayo

Editor's Note: This story, which ran Friday, did not end. Here is the story in its entirety.

Reviewed by **GEORGE BENNETT**
The Village School

"Itch," by Simon Mayo

The hero of "Itch" is a 14-year-old English schoolboy with the unusual name of Itchingham Lofte (pronounced Loft). It's never explained why his mother chose the name, but

she's the only one who uses it. Everyone else calls him Itch. Itch is a bit of a misfit, who somehow lacks the knack of getting on with his fellow students. What really interests him is chemical elements — all of them.

Itch's ambition is to collect a sample of all the elements in the Periodic Table and when we meet him he has just caused an explosion in his bedroom, and has only been saved from severe burns by "the astute decision of his 11-year-old sister, Chloe, to

throw a cup of water over his face."

Itch's closest friend is his cousin Jack — short for Jacqueline — who's in the same class at school and who accepts Itch for who he is, including his chemical obsessions. When Itch gets into trouble, Jack and Chloe together have his back, and very soon Itch's pursuit of rare elements gets all three of them into greater difficulties and danger than they could ever

SEE ITCH A6

Itch

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imagine.

Through a contact in the mineral-collecting world, Itch acquires a previously unknown element — in the form of a small, unusually heavy, rock — that appears to have surfaced after a recent minor earthquake, not unknown in Cornwall, the far western English county where Itch lives. This highly radioactive element quickly attracts the attention of an unscrupulous energy corporation, terrorist groups, idealistic clean-energy enthusiasts and the government. All want to control the element, and Itch quickly learns to trust none of them, including the mysterious new science teacher at his school, who turns out to be not at all what he seems.

Itch tries to find a way to keep the rock hidden, with the help of Chloe and Jack, even though they quickly discover that any sort of contact with it can prove hazardous, and even fatal. The three of them decide that the only way to deal with the dangerous new element is to put it permanently out of everyone's reach, which is far from easy when half the world is looking for it, and them.

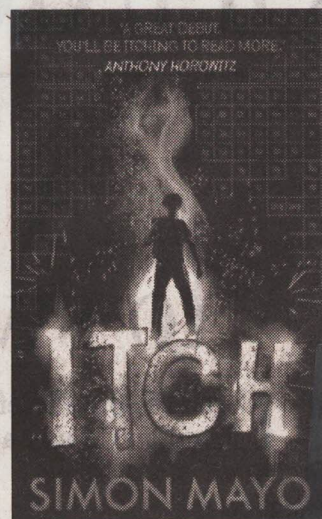
Itch is partly an adventurous romp, with one action-packed incident after another, similar in style to the popular Alex Rider series, but it is much more interest-



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ing. Partly this is because Itch himself is a more engaging and complex character than Alex Rider, with the sort of difficulties at school that anyone could relate to. But it's also because the book is peppered with information about various elements in Itch's collection, several of which turn out to have particular uses which help him thwart his various pursuers.

None of this information sits heavily in the text, however, and while it's the kiss of death to describe any children's fiction as educational, the reader can't help learning something interesting about a whole range of elements whose names we might know, but whose characteristics are less apparent. We begin to understand what it is that so fascinates Itch about the Periodic Table, and helpful appen-



dices fill in some of the gaps, if you're that way inclined.

Itch himself turns out to be both resourceful and brave, as much to his own surprise as to that of his friends and enemies. He develops into an engaging hero, while Jack and Chloe become important partners in his struggles. These don't end with this book, because Itch has two equally enjoyable sequels, and although it can be read as a stand-alone novel, you'll want to know what happens next.

The trilogy is best suited to sixth-graders and above, but anyone who can cope with the later Harry Potter books should have no trouble in reading and understanding it. It moves faster, too!

George Bennett is a 5th-6th grade teacher at The Village School, Royalston.