



That Shakespeare Kid

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Middle school students Emma and Peter are assigned Act I of Romeo and Juliet to read for homework. Peter wants to get a better copy than his tattered paperback. So he climbs up onto a chair in his mother's study to retrieve her heavy Riverside Shakespeare. Just as he tugs on it, the chair moves and the book hits him on the head. When Peter regains consciousness, he can speak only in lines from Shakespeare. So instead of saying a simple "hello," he might say something like, "How dost thou?" or instead of a simple "goodbye" he might say, "Parting is such sweet sorrow."

Emma Malcolm narrates this appealing young adult fantasy. She describes herself and her neighbor Peter Marlowe as “happy nerds.” Yet when Peter suddenly becomes unable to speak modern English, everything changes. As hard as Peter tries to speak for himself, his words come out as Shakespeare’s own. His strange speech irritates Emma at the school bus stop and embarrasses her in the baseball stadium. He is sent to the principal and the school psychologist for acting up—no one seems to realize that Peter would cheerfully speak modern English if only he could. Luckily, he understands contemporary English despite being unable to speak it. His family believes that he is faking, at least at first. Emma thinks so, too, but she soon realizes that he cannot help himself. However, when he discovers that he can text and instant message in modern English, Emma becomes his translator.

English is Peter’s favorite class, and Ms. Hastings is his favorite teacher. Ms. Hastings decides to guide the class even further into Shakespeare’s world. She determines to help them put on the 30-Minute version of Romeo and Juliet. Peter and Emma will be the leads, the play’s star-crossed lovers—after all, Romeo and Juliet were about their age. Emma has never kissed a boy, and she realizes that she is about to experience her first kiss in front of the whole school.

While the play is in the rehearsal stage, a newspaper reporter interviews Peter and his parents, and the resulting article makes Peter a local celebrity. Then a classmate makes a video of Peter speaking Shakespeare’s words and it goes viral. Peter and Emma are invited to appear on the Today Show. Peter greets America with the words, “Fair thoughts and happy hours attend on you.” Appearing on the show turns out to be more exciting than expected, especially when the interview ends with a romantic surprise for Emma. Finally, it is time for the play to begin. The leading actors perform their scenes flawlessly, and at last they kiss. Romeo and Juliet turns out to have a plot twist, at least for Peter and Emma.

This engaging comedy introduces Shakespeare’s language gracefully, making it part of a light and charming fantasy about language and first love.

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