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## **The phantom tollbooth**

### **Chapter Summaries**

#### Chapter 1

Milo is a boy who does not know what to do with himself. He is bored senseless by practically everything in his life and is constantly trying to find something exciting or interesting. Milo especially dislikes his schoolwork because he cannot understand the use behind learning geography or math and thinks that learning is "the greatest waste of time of all."

One day, Milo goes into his bedroom to find a strange package waiting for him. The box is not quite square but not quite round and is addressed to "MILO, WHO HAS PLENTY OF TIME." There is no return address on the package, and Milo has no idea who might have sent it to him—it is not his birthday or Christmas. Deciding that there is no way he can return the box, he opens it. Inside he finds an unassembled turnpike tollbooth, a map, a book of traffic rules, and an instruction manual. He puts the tollbooth together and gets into a small electric car, one of the many toys he is usually too bored to play with. As he approaches the tollbooth he is told to have his destination in mind, so he randomly picks the city of Dictionopolis from the map and passes through the turnstile.

#### Chapter 2

Once through the tollbooth, Milo finds himself speeding along a country highway. He is shocked to discover that the tollbooth was no toy at all. Since it is a beautiful day on the road, he continues on his trip. Before long, he arrives at Expectations where an excitable little man rushes up to his car. The Whether Man, has a habit of saying everything three times. In response to Milo's questions about how to reach Dictionopolis, the Whether Man talks nonstop about navigation and the weather.

Milo presses on, leaving Expectations. The road gets increasingly curvy and repetitive. Bored by the seemingly endless circles, Milo's mind begins to wander and he becomes very drowsy. The car also seems to tire and grinds to a halt. As he sits, almost asleep, a distant voice informs Milo that he is in the Doldrums.

After looking around, Milo realizes there is a tiny man sitting on his shoulder who changes color to match it. He then notices a number of little people around him hiding like chameleons. They introduce themselves as the Lethargians and describe their idle lives in the Doldrums, explaining that thinking and laughing are both outlawed.

Suddenly a large dog with a clock for a body comes running up, frightening the Lethargians away. The watchdog whose job it is to make sure nobody wastes time, suspiciously asks Milo what he is doing in the Doldrums. When Milo replies that he is "just killing time," the



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watchdog becomes furious and tells Milo that the only thing worse than wasting time is killing it. He tells Milo that if he wants to leave the Doldrums he only needs to do the opposite of what got him there. Since Milo drifted into the Doldrums by not thinking, he concentrates on thinking and his car begins moving. Soon he is back on his way to Dictionopolis with the watchdog.

## Chapter 3

As the two travelers make their way toward Dictionopolis, the watchdog apologizes for his gruff behavior and explains that people expect watchdogs to be ferocious. He introduces himself as Tock and launches into a speech about the value of time and the importance of the watchdog's role in preserving it as he and Milo approach the gates of Dictionopolis.

Once inside, Milo and Tock discover that it is market day in the city, and the square is filled with merchants selling all sorts of words and letters. They meet the five royal advisors, who have the curious habit of repeating each other in synonyms and randomly defining some of the words each other use. The advisors explain the function of the word market in a dizzyingly complicated fashion, leaving poor Milo as lost as when he first entered the city. "I never knew words could be so confusing," he tells Tock. "Only when you use a lot to say a little," the watchdog replies.

## Chapter 4

Milo and Tock explore the word market, looking over shelves full of everyday words and fancy-sounding words (which are so expensive Milo cannot afford even one) and jars filled only with letters. Milo samples an A and finds that it tastes "sweet and delicious—just the way you'd expect an A to taste."

As Milo and the shopkeeper talk about the construction of words, the buzzing of a giant bee surprises them. The Spelling Bee tells them not to be alarmed and then spells the word "alarmed" for them. The insect claims that he can spell almost any word and proves it by taking challenges. When Milo expresses his amazement at this skill, another insect, this one looking more like a beetle, trots over and pronounces it "BALDERDASH!"

Dodging swings of the grumpy beetle's cane, the Spelling Bee introduces him as the Humbug, "a very dislikeable fellow." The two giant insects begin an argument and things go from bad to worse when the Spelling Bee knocks the Humbug's hat off his head and the Humbug begins swinging wildly with his cane, knocking one stall into another and causing the whole marketplace to collapse like dominoes.

## Chapter 5

When the dust from the Humbug's disastrous clumsiness settles, the merchants begin hollering in mixed-up nonsense because all of their words have become jumbled. Eventually, they right the stalls and sweep up the spilled words, finishing up just as Officer Shrift arrives on the scene. Milo is surprised by how short the policeman is, noticing that he is twice as wide as he is tall. Officer Shrift begins his investigation by declaring everyone present to be



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guilty and then begins asking very confusing questions that seem to have nothing to do with the collapse of the marketplace. Officer Shrift finds Milo guilty of various ridiculous crimes and, pronounces a sentence of six million years in prison then escorts Milo and Tock to a dank and musty dungeon. He warns them about "the witch" in the prison then shuts the three into a cell.

Inside Milo meets the "Which," Faintly Macabre. She explains that she is King Azaz's great aunt and was once in charge of choosing which words would be used for which occasions. As time went on, she noticed how frightfully wasteful people were with their words, often using too many for the simplest statements. So she began to give people fewer and fewer words to use, eventually becoming so miserly that nobody could speak or write at all. King Azaz became infuriated and locked the Which in the prison.

Faintly Macabre tells Milo that only the return of Rhyme and Reason will free her. When Milo seems confused, she settles down to tell him the story of Rhyme and Reason.

## Chapter 6

Faintly Macabre begins the story of Rhyme and Reason by describing the horrible place the Lands Beyond were when they were first created. One day, a young prince from across the sea appeared and established a city that would become the Kingdom of Wisdom. Eventually he had two sons who went out in the wilderness to start their own cities, one founding Dictionopolis and the other establishing Digitopolis.

The king also found a basket with twin baby girls in his gardens one day. The king was delighted with the girls, whom he named Rhyme and Reason, and he raised them as his own children. When the king died, he left instructions that the Kingdom of Wisdom was to be divided equally between his two sons, who would also have the responsibility of caring for Rhyme and Reason.

Over the years, Azaz and the Mathemagician came to rely upon the princesses' wise judgment as the brothers grew more and more competitive and distrustful. Things reached a boiling point when they began arguing about whether numbers or letters were more important. The two rulers brought their quarrel to the princesses who, after careful consideration, declared that numbers and words were equally important.

At last, Azaz and the Mathemagician were able to agree upon something: they were infuriated by princesses' answer. In an act of rage, they banished Rhyme and Reason from the Kingdom and imprisoned them in the Castle in the Air. When the story is done, the Which explains that Officer Shrift "loves putting people in prison, but does not care about keeping them there" and shows Milo and Tock the way out. On the outside, the king's five advisors find them and immediately lead them off to the Royal Banquet.

## Chapter 7





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Inside the banquet hall, Milo and Tock find a sizeable party waiting for them. The Humbug explains that they have been waiting for the guests of honor to select the meal. Milo proposes that they have a "light meal," and immediately a set of waiters hurries into the room carrying serving platters. When they remove the lids, rays of light shoot all over the banquet hall. The Humbug suggests that Milo select a dish that the guests might find "a little more filling." Milo, who has not picked up on the menu game yet, orders a square meal, prompting the waiters to bring plates filled with a variety of squares. For dessert, the waiters bring out platters of half-baked ideas, which the Humbug explains are very sweet but can cause indigestion. Milo munches on his "THE EARTH IS FLAT" while the king devours "NIGHT AIR IS BAD AIR."

### Chapter 8

As soon as King Azaz's nonsensical Royal Banquet is over, the guests rush from the hall, leaving only Azaz, Milo, Tock and the Humbug, who explains that they have all gone to dinner. The king declares that he will command that his guests eat their dinners before the banquet. That would be just as bad, Milo argues. Milo gently suggests that the return of Rhyme and Reason might help sort things out. The king agrees but thinks that it is impossible, since someone would have to go all the way to Digitopolis to convince the Mathemagician then get past the wicked demons in the Mountains of Ignorance and scale the two thousand step staircase up to the Castle in the Air.

The king charges Milo with this seemingly impossible mission, ominously telling him that there is "one more serious problem" with the quest that Milo will only learn once it is over. Azaz hands the young boy a small box that contains all the words he knows and tells him that he may find it handy on his journey. Recognizing that Milo will need a guide, the king orders the Humbug to go along on as well. The Humbug, who has been trying with all his might to agree with everybody all at once, suddenly finds himself in a very disagreeable position but is calmed by the king's flattery. As a crowd gathers to cheer them on their way, Milo and his two companions embark on their great adventure

### Chapter 9

Motoring along in the electric car, Milo, Tock and the Humbug take in the scenery and stop to enjoy a panoramic view. When Milo comments that the view is beautiful, a strange voice counters that "[i]t's all in the way you look at things." Milo whirls around and sees a boy about his age floating several feet above the ground. "For instance," the floating boy continues, "If you happened to like deserts, you might not think this was beautiful at all."

Milo asks the boy how the boy is able to float in the air at the same time as the boy was about to ask Milo how Milo is able to touch the ground with his feet. In his family, the boy explains, everyone is born with their heads at the height they will be once they grow up; instead of growing steadily toward the sky, their legs grown down toward the ground. Milo explains that, where he comes from, the opposite is true.



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The boy introduces himself as Alec Bings and claims that he has the power to see through things. In fact, the only thing he cannot see, Alec explains, "is whatever happens to be right in front of [his] nose." Milo is dazzled by this and wants to be able to see things as well. Alec tells him to simply start thinking like an adult and once Milo does, sure enough he begins to rise off the ground. Then he suddenly drops back to the earth and declares that he'd prefer to keep seeing things as a child since it is "not so far to fall."

## Chapter 10

Alec, Milo, Tock, and the Humbug continue their walk in the forest, coming upon a large clearing in which lies a magnificent metropolis. The city, Alec says, is called Illusions and is really just a mirage. Its twin city, Reality, turns out to be all around the travelers. Alec explains that Reality was once as beautiful as Illusions, but people in Reality decided that things would be much more efficient if they went everywhere as fast as possible and didn't bother to stop and appreciate things along the way. As a result, the city withered away.

Alec next leads the group to an enormous open-air orchestra concert of over a thousand musicians, all conducted by Chroma the Great. Chroma waves his arms, and the musicians seem to be playing their instruments, although Milo doesn't hear anything. Alec explains that this orchestra is responsible for providing all the colors in the world. Milo meets Chroma, who talks about what a dull place the world would be without colors before Chroma hurries off to bed. Before he goes, Chroma asks Milo to keep an eye on the orchestra overnight and to wake him at 5:23 a.m. for the sunrise.



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