BOOK GUIDE

STEALING THE SCORE

BY SYLVIA LIU

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By Sylvia Liu
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The Story

Soccer superfans Ethan, Sasha, and Mateo are thrilled that the biggest sporting event in the world is coming to their backyard. When a contest offering a once-in-a-lifetime chance to attend the World Cup is announced, they are all ready to do whatever it takes to win. To do so, they must complete a scavenger hunt throughout Miami to find a replica pair of the lucky cleats worn by their favorite player, El Botín (or The Boot).

Best friends Ethan, a competitive soccer player, and Sasha, an online footy gamer, are wary of privileged soccer influencer Mateo at first. But they can't seem to stop crossing paths with him, and reluctantly join forces. What starts as a strictly strategic alliance to solve the scavenger hunt clues takes a turn when El Botín's real cleats go missing. The fate of the whole tournament could be in jeopardy—unless the new friends can uncover the truth!

Reading Group Questions

1. In the story, El Botín is extremely superstitious. Why do you think superstitions are so common in sports? Why can this be dangerous, as seen by El Botín's character?
2. Which of the characters in the book do you relate to the most?
3. What is something that all the main characters in the story have in common?
4. Do you think El Botín was justified in the way that he reacted to the expectations and pressures put on him? Explain why.

About the Author

Photo © K Woodard Photography.

Sylvia Liu grew up with books and daydreams in Caracas, Venezuela. Once an environmental attorney, she now spins stories about nature, sports, and friendship. Her middle grade books include *Near and Deer*, *Manatee's Best Friend*, and *Hana Hsu and the Ghost Crab Nation*. Sylvia lives in Virginia with her family and a fluffy cat.

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Author Q&A

What was your inspiration for writing a World Cup themed book?

Ever since I was a child growing up in Caracas, Venezuela, watching the World Cup every four years was a huge highlight. The entire city and everyone I knew were so excited about the tournament. One of my most vivid early memories was watching Maradona's famous run with the ball from the halfway line resulting in a goal in the 1986 quarterfinal game between Argentina and England. I can still remember the cheers erupting from all the open windows of our apartment building as the announcer yelled, "GOOOOOOOOL" (Venezuela wasn't in the competition, so we all supported the South American teams). The last World Cup in 2022 reminded me how much I loved this competition (the final between Argentina and France was epic), and I've been watching a lot of international soccer since then. With the World Cup coming to the US in Summer 2026, it was the perfect time to share my love of soccer by writing *Stealing the Score*.

What do you hope readers take away from El Botín's story?

First, I hope readers enjoy a fun and exciting story about soccer, the World Cup, and three friends working together to solve a mystery. Beyond that, I want readers to know that anyone, no matter where they are in their life, can rely on friends, family, and themselves to face their problems. And finally, I hope readers come away from El Botín's story believing in the magic of "the beautiful game."

What is it about Ethan, Sasha, and Mateo that make them a good team?

Ethan, Sasha, and Mateo make a good team, because although they have different personalities and interests, they are united by their love of the game. They don't all start out as friends, but their curiosity about the mystery propels them to work together. Each brings their own strengths to the team: Ethan knows competitive soccer and can use those insights to make things right, Sasha is smart and great at solving problems, and Mateo is savvy about social media and how it affects people. The three also each have a special connection to El Botín, giving them important insights to help solve the mystery.

As a soccer fan, did you learn anything new about the sport during your writing process?

I love researching and learning new things when I write novels. For this one, I had a blast becoming immersed in soccer. I already knew a lot about the World Cup, and I follow many teams and soccer stars, but I learned new aspects of the game. I found out about how talented young soccer players in the US can develop competitively through travel leagues, MLS academies, and other opportunities. I delved into the ins and outs of how countries can qualify for the World Cup, especially for teams in CONMEBOL, the South American confederation. I also learned a bit about playing EA Sports (formerly FIFA) from my nephews.

One of my favorite parts of researching the book was attending national soccer games in person. A couple of memorable games I went to were the men's Copa America quarterfinal game between Uruguay and Brazil and a friendly game between the United States and Ghana. There's something so special about going to a live sports event and soaking in the atmosphere as a spectator.

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