



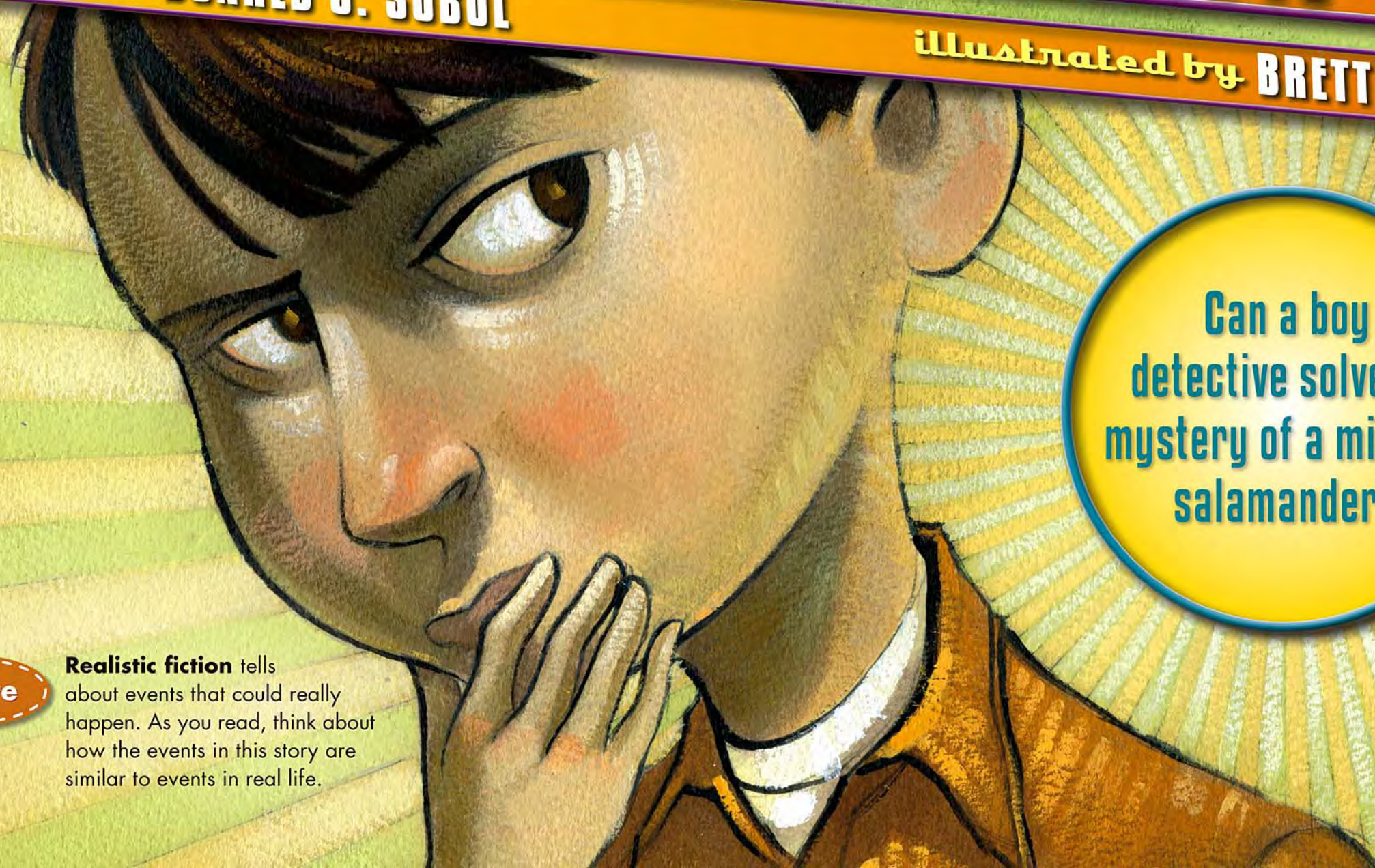
ENCYCLOPEDIA

BROWN

and the Case of the Slippery Salamander

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Can a boy
detective solve the
mystery of a missing
salamander?

Genre

Realistic fiction tells about events that could really happen. As you read, think about how the events in this story are similar to events in real life.



To a visitor, Idaville looked like an ordinary seaside town. It had churches, two car washes, and three movie theaters. It had bike paths, sparkling white beaches, a synagogue, and plenty of good fishing spots.

But there was something out of the ordinary about Idaville: For more than a year, no child or grown-up had gotten away with breaking a law.

People wanted to know: How did Idaville do it?

The secret resided in a red brick house at 13 Rover Avenue. That was where Idaville's police chief lived with his wife and son.

Chief Brown was a smart, kind, and brave man. But he wasn't the one who kept crooks from getting away with their crimes. No, the brains behind it all was his ten-year-old son, Encyclopedia.

Encyclopedia's real name was Leroy. But only his parents and teachers called him that. Everyone else called him "Encyclopedia" because his brain was filled with more facts than a reference book.

Sometimes the Brown family was tempted to tell the world about Encyclopedia's amazing talent as a crime-solver. But so far they hadn't leaked a word. For one thing, the Browns didn't like to boast. For another, who would believe that Idaville's top detective was a fifth-grader?

One Monday night Chief Brown sat at the dinner table, staring at his plate of spaghetti. So far he hadn't slurped up a single strand. Encyclopedia and his mother knew the reason.

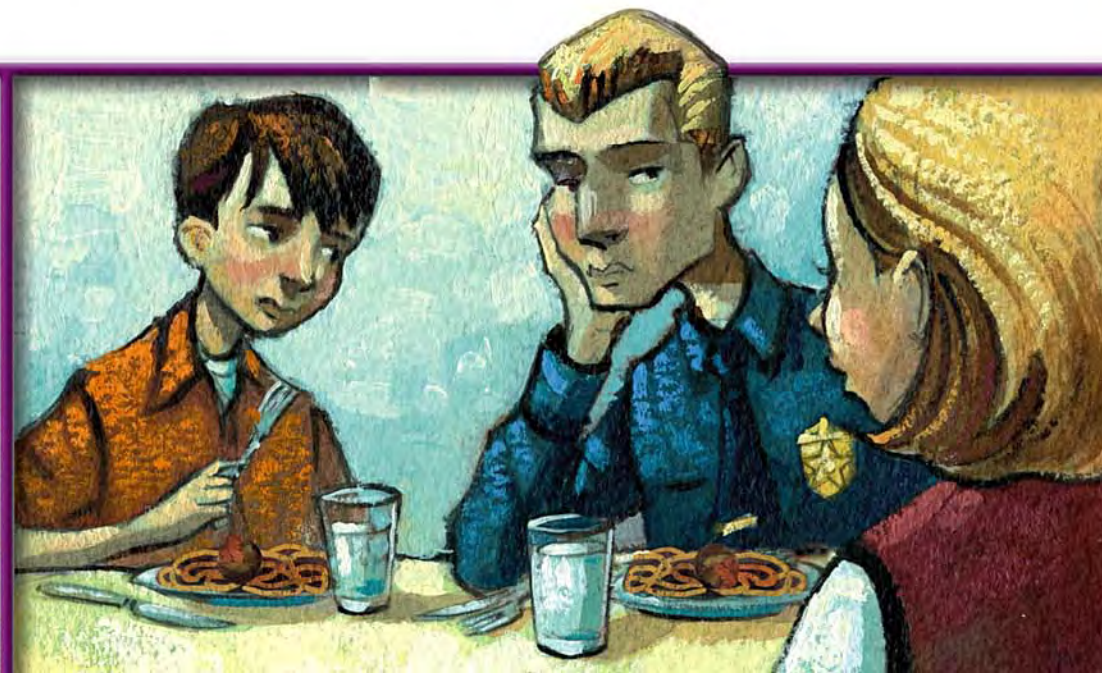
The chief wasn't eating because he had come up against a crime that he couldn't solve.

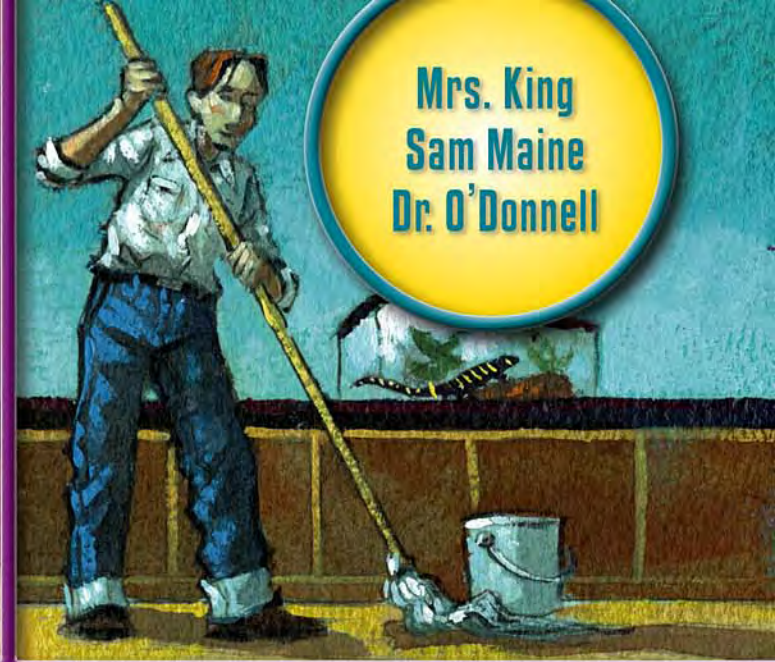
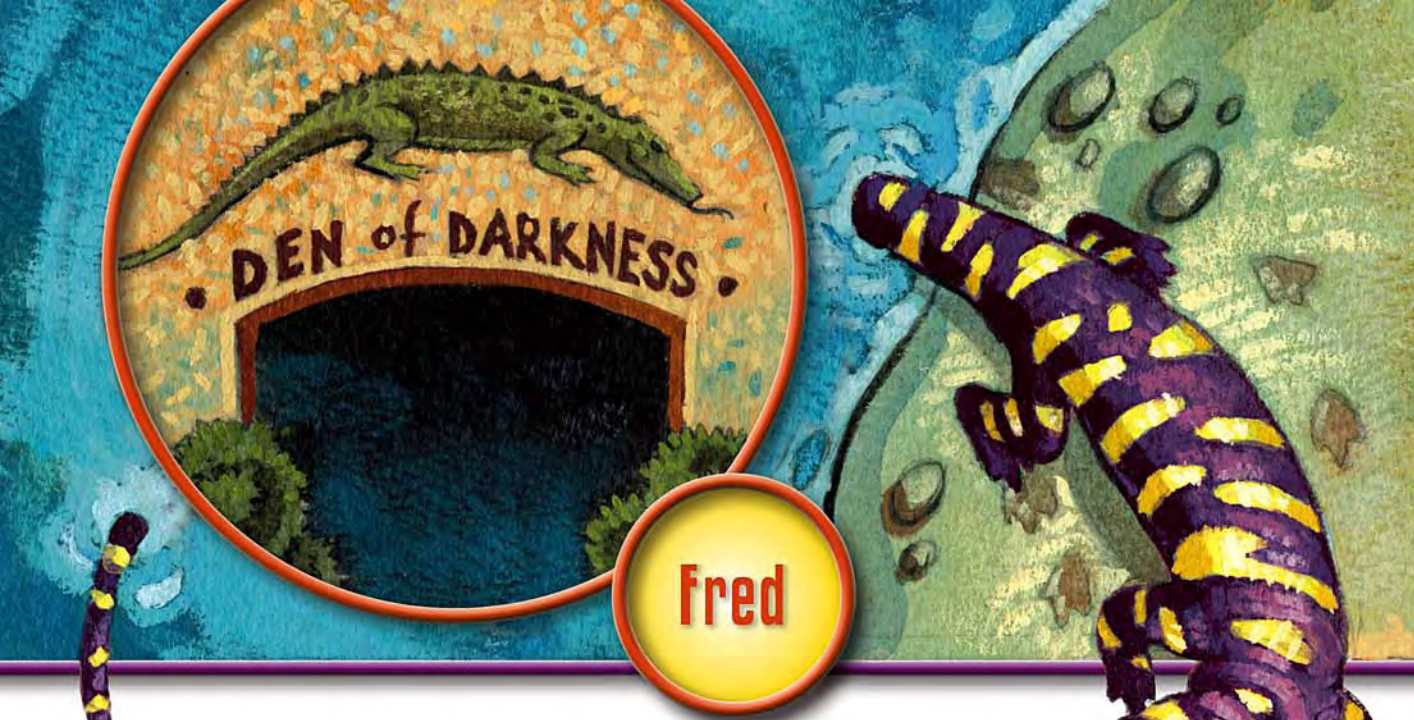
Encyclopedia waited for his dad to tell him about the case. Whenever Chief Brown was stumped, Encyclopedia cracked the case for him, usually by asking just one question.

At last Chief Brown looked up. "There was a theft at the aquarium today," he said, rubbing his forehead.

Last summer an aquarium had opened near the beach. The most popular attractions were the giant shark tanks, the dolphin shows, and the Den of Darkness.

The Den of Darkness was a huge indoor exhibit of reptiles and amphibians. Encyclopedia especially liked visiting the frogs and salamanders in the amphibian section.





"I hope the great white sharks weren't stolen," Mrs. Brown said with a smile. "That would certainly take a bite out of business!"

Chief Brown shook his head. "It wasn't the sharks."

Encyclopedia put down his fork and listened carefully as his father explained that Fred, a tiger salamander, had been stolen.

"Fred was shipped to the aquarium only two days ago," Chief Brown said. "He was being kept apart from the other animals until the officials were sure he was healthy. If he got a clean bill of health, he was to go on display next month."

"Do you have any clues, dear?" Mrs. Brown asked.

The chief frowned. "Not many. All we know is that the salamander disappeared this morning, sometime between ten-thirty and eleven forty-five."

"Why would someone steal a salamander?" Mrs. Brown wondered.

"Fred is the aquarium's only tiger salamander," her husband explained. "From what the director of the aquarium told me, someone could sell him for a lot of money."

"Really?" Mrs. Brown's eyes widened. "Do you think a visitor might have stolen him?"

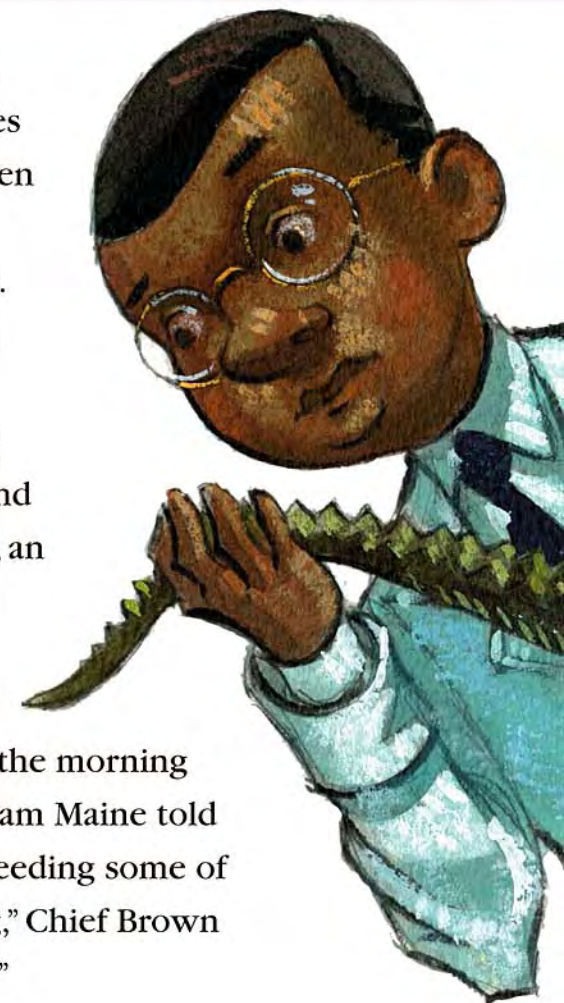
"It's very unlikely," Chief Brown replied. "Employees and volunteers are the only ones who have access to the back room in the Den of Darkness where Fred was being kept."

Chief Brown told Encyclopedia and Mrs. Brown that three people had been working at the exhibit that morning: Mrs. King, who volunteered at the aquarium every Monday; Sam Maine, the man in charge of cleaning and maintaining the exhibits; and Dr. O'Donnell, an expert on reptiles and amphibians.

"Did you question the three of them?" Mrs. Brown asked.

The chief nodded. "Dr. O'Donnell spent the morning examining a new crocodile from Australia. Sam Maine told me he was busy cleaning out exhibits and feeding some of the lizards. Several people saw him working," Chief Brown added, "so it looks like he's telling the truth."

"What about Mrs. King?" his wife prodded.



Chief Brown frowned. "Actually, Sam Maine seems very suspicious of Mrs. King," he confided. "And after talking with her I can see why. Mrs. King is fascinated with salamanders."

"Fascinated with salamanders?" Mrs. Brown echoed.

The chief nodded again. "She told me she has dozens of them at home as pets, and that Fred is the first tiger salamander she's ever seen." He shook his head. "Mrs. King does seem odd—she thinks salamanders are sacred creatures with magical powers."

Encyclopedia spoke up. "In ancient times, people used salamanders for medicine. They also believed that salamanders could eat fire and live in flames."

"Maybe Fred wasn't stolen for money," Mrs. Brown said thoughtfully. "Maybe Mrs. King took Fred just because she thinks he's a special specimen!"

"That's exactly what I've been thinking," Chief Brown admitted. "But there's no proof that Mrs. King had the opportunity to steal Fred. She was with a group of schoolchildren from ten-thirty to eleven-fifteen. After that she went over to the cafeteria for a coffee break. One of the cashiers said he saw her there."

Chief Brown sighed with frustration. "I hate to admit it, but this case has me baffled!"

Encyclopedia closed his eyes. His parents watched him hopefully. They knew that when Encyclopedia closed his eyes, it meant he was doing his deepest thinking.

A moment later Encyclopedia was ready. He opened his eyes and asked his one question:

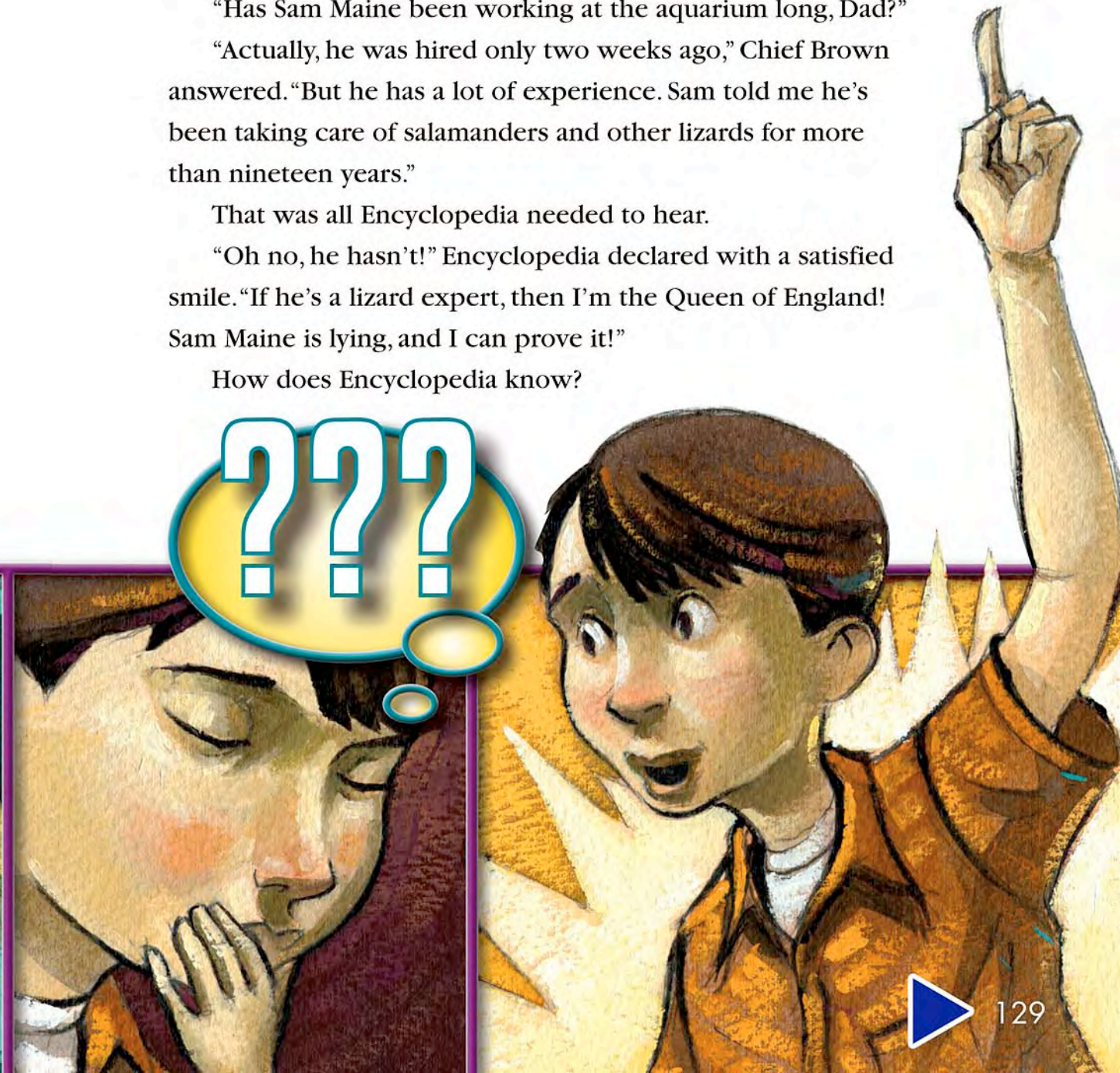
"Has Sam Maine been working at the aquarium long, Dad?"

"Actually, he was hired only two weeks ago," Chief Brown answered. "But he has a lot of experience. Sam told me he's been taking care of salamanders and other lizards for more than nineteen years."

That was all Encyclopedia needed to hear.

"Oh no, he hasn't!" Encyclopedia declared with a satisfied smile. "If he's a lizard expert, then I'm the Queen of England! Sam Maine is lying, and I can prove it!"

How does Encyclopedia know?



SOLUTION to the Case of the Slippery Salamander

Encyclopedia knew that Sam Maine was lying because he told Chief Brown he'd been taking care of "salamanders and other lizards for more than nineteen years." Anyone who'd been taking care of salamanders for that long would know that salamanders are not lizards. They are classified as amphibians. Lizards are classified as reptiles.

Sam Maine admitted stealing the valuable new tiger salamander that morning. After he returned Fred to the aquarium, he was fired from his job as caretaker.

