The Cornfield Maze Mystery

A Story About Food, Farming, and Discovery

By David Upthegrove

SAMPLE CHAPTERS FOR CURRICULUM REVIEW

About The Cornfield Maze Mystery

The Cornfield Maze Mystery is a middle-grade narrative (ages 8-12) that introduces students to modern food systems through the eyes of three curious friends: Mary, Ana, and Ben.

What begins as a fun day at Uncle Ray's farm maze becomes a science fair project exploring:

- How corn is planted, grown, and harvested
- Genetically modified crops and herbicide use
- Food processing from farm to table
- The gut microbiome and ultra-processed foods
- Critical thinking and evidence-based reasoning
- Making informed choices about food and health

Standards Alignment: This book supports CCSS ELA and NGSS. A comprehensive Educator and Parent Companion Guide with lesson plans, activities, and assessments is available separately.

Approach: The story takes a balanced, inquiry-based approach encouraging curiosity rather than fear, presenting multiple perspectives, and empowering students to ask questions and think critically.

Introduction

This book was written to help young readers learn about the food we eat, especially corn and to spark curiosity about where food comes from and how it affects our bodies. Corn is in a lot of food products many of us eat every day, so it makes a great place to start asking questions: How does corn grow? What happens on farms? What do farmers use to protect crops and why might that matter to us?

We'll explore a couple of examples; a weed killer called glyphosate, and genetically modified corn. This information is not to frighten you, but to show how chemicals used in farming can sometimes end up in soil, water, and food. Scientists are still learning exactly what long-term, small amounts of these chemicals do to our bodies and whether bio engineered foods impact health. That's why asking questions, reading carefully, and learning how food is grown are important skills. Knowledge is power: the more we understand the better choices we can make for our health.

The language is simple; the ideas are explained in short chapters. My hope is to inspire curiosity, not fear, to encourage you to explore, experiment, and discover how a clean food supply helps bodies grow strong and minds stay sharp.

This story begins with three curious kids, a cornfield maze, and questions. The goal of this book is not to frighten readers but to encourage curiosity and thoughtful questions. Along the way they learn how food moves from farm to table and how communities can work together to make change.

Chapter 1 - Harvest BBQ at Uncle Rays

They were at Uncle Ray's for the last-blast-of-summer family barbecue. On this farm, the corn grew in tidy rows that seemed to stretch forever—perfect for a maze. From the hilltop, Uncle Ray's farm looked larger than on the map: green rows of corn marching like a small, patient army. The red barn that leaned just enough to seem friendly and the maze made of paths weaving through tall cornstalks forming a living puzzle.

Mary, Ana and Ben were excited to be at the farm. The family BBQ was a long standing tradition held every year before the corn harvest. The long gravel driveway smelled like sun-warmed dust and freshly cut grass. There was light smoke and the smell of BBQ drifting from behind the house.

Mary, Ana, and Ben tumbled from the pickup and ran across the yard. They were the Corn Crew: Mary tightened the laces of her sneakers and grinned. At eleven, she liked facts the way some kids liked video games—she collected them and thought about how they fit together. Beside her, Ana, also eleven, swung a ribbon in her hair and laughed at a bee that would not be shooed.

Ana's family had moved into town two years earlier and she loved stories about where food came from. Ben, a ten-year-old with a quick smile and quicker questions, carried a small notebook. He liked to write down things he wanted to remember.

Uncle Joe greeted the children and handed each of them a paper map with bold letters: FIND THE FLAG. He warned them to mind the rows. It sounded like a game, and at first it was.

They ran, ducking and spinning between green walls. The corn leaves rustled at their shoulders like the pages of a book. The sun slid toward the edge of the sky, and the air smelled faintly of smoke from the barbeque.

They raced between the towering stalks, but then Mary noticed something strange: a patch where the leaves looked dull and powdery, where kernels were smaller and the corn silk had a crust of sticky droplets.

A crooked wooden sign read: SPRAYED—DO NOT ENTER.

The maze shifted from a game to a question. The Corn Crew decided to be scientists. After they'd played until their legs ached, Uncle Ray found them with a sun-faded cap in his hand and a smile on his face.

You explorers ready for a farm tour? he asked. Uncle Ray was gentle and patient. He owned the fields that rolled behind the house and had farmed the land for longer than any of them had been alive.

Yes! they answered together. They would ask Uncle Ray what he had sprayed and why.

Chapter 2 - Machines and Seeds

Uncle Ray led them across a track of gravel to where the big machines were stored between jobs. He spoke with pride and simple honesty.

This is a tractor, he said, patting the big tire on a blue machine. This one pulls things—planters at planting, grain carts at harvest, trailers to move soil or seed.

Mary looked closely at a long, narrow machine with rows of metal discs. What's that?

That's a row-crop planter, Uncle Ray said. It drops seeds precisely into the soil when spring comes. Farmers want the plants evenly spaced so each one gets enough sun and nutrients.

They passed a broad machine with long arms and nozzles.

That's a boom sprayer, Uncle Ray explained. It sprays herbicide or fertilizer across the field. Sometimes people use airplanes—crop dusters—to spray, but for big corn fields we usually use these or big self-propelled sprayers.

Ben's eyebrows shot up. So the sprayer uses poison?

Uncle Ray shook his head. Herbicides are chemicals that target plants we don't want—like weeds. They're made to be effective against certain plant processes. We use them carefully and follow rules about how much, when, and how to apply.

Near the storage sheds they saw big tanks and labeled drums. A sign read: Authorized Personnel Only—Chemical Storage.

We keep chemicals locked up for safety, Uncle Ray said. And we wear protective equipment when handling them.

Ana peered at a narrow bag labeled with small print. What about the seeds? You said they were special earlier when Mary asked.

Uncle Ray smiled. Good question. Seed companies develop varieties that are bred or genetically modified to tolerate certain herbicides or to resist insects. That means we can control weeds without hurting the crop, and insects won't eat the corn the way they used to.

Mary tilted her head. So the corn itself is changed?

Yes, Uncle Ray said. Some seeds are hybrid—bred the old-fashioned way. Others are genetically modified. That means scientists have inserted specific genes so the plant can make a protein that protects it from a pest—like Bt corn does—or so the plant won't be harmed by a certain herbicide.

About This Sample

This sample includes the Introduction and select chapters from The Cornfield Maze Mystery. The complete book (44 pages) follows Mary, Ana, and Ben through their entire investigation—from farm visits and processing plant tours to grocery store research, experiments, interviews with health professionals, and their final science fair presentation.

Key Themes Throughout the Book:

- Inquiry-based learning and the scientific method
- Food systems from farm to table
- GMO crops and agricultural chemicals
- Food processing and corn-derived ingredients
- Gut microbiome and ultra-processed foods
- Critical thinking and evaluating evidence
- Multiple perspectives (farmers, scientists, health professionals)
- Empowering students to make informed choices

Companion Guide Available:

The Cornfield Maze Mystery Companion Guide provides educators with lesson plans, discussion questions, hands-on activities, experiments, vocabulary support, and assessment tools—all aligned to CCSS ELA and NGSS standards.

For More Information:

To request the complete book, companion guide, or additional curriculum materials, please contact:

[Your Name]

[Your Email]

[Your Phone]

[Your Website, if applicable]