



A Matter of Control

J. E. Solinski

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In J. E. Solinski's intriguing young adult novel *A Matter of Control*, a well-meaning English teacher tries to motivate her students, though they do not always understand her intentions.

Despite thriving in Detroit's underground drug market at sixteen years old, Travis struggles with internal feelings of worthlessness. Alex is a star football player with a daunting secret that has plagued him for years. Reba comes from an underprivileged home that's threatened by Detroit's street gangs; she faces bullying, but is still a model student whose acting talents are remarkable.

All three are caring high school English teacher Martha's students; she is invested in their lives, assumes that she is in control of her class, and works to help her students deal with the difficult situations they face. However, she is also unaware that her son, Danny, is struggling to meet her expectations, and that he's looking to escape from the pressure.

As the novel switches between the teenagers' stories, and their teacher's story, secrets are revealed, and the conflicts faced by each character are explored. In the beginning, the five lead separate lives, but soon their stories converge. Reba and Martha become instrumental in helping Alex deal with his secret; Travis tries to shield Reba's family from gang life; Martha comes up with ways to inspire Travis, helping him to develop his writing skills.

The book's predominant themes are the illusion of human control and the importance of faith in God. Over time, the five main characters learn they cannot control their fates, but that God can, if trusted. But the novel also addresses poverty, crime, dyslexia, drugs, and gang life in conjunction with these themes, using the five's stories to do so; each person's challenges are made distinctive.

The settings are covered using striking imagery, as when Martha drives down a dilapidated street, and bystanders stare at her car; they are likened to glaring, wary tigers. Later, Martha wonders whether children playing in a crime-ridden neighborhood will become like frogs boiled alive by the crime surrounding them, and unmaintained tenements are compared to discarded Christmas garland. Travis is also compared to a caged animal while he's waiting to be heard.

By the end, the characters' individual conflicts are resolved in tidy, uplifting form—some through faith, some through reconciliation, and some through bravery. *A Matter of Control* is a Christian young adult novel in which teenagers strive to maintain control over their hectic lives.

EDITH WAIRIMU (April 23, 2021)

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