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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ JUVENILE FICTION

A New Leash on Life

Erna Mueller
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Erna Mueller's *A New Leash on Life* began its life as an award winning screenplay that was later adapted into a novel which won first place in the 2009 Good Read Fiction competition at a Woman's Write. As a novel *A New Leash on Life* has some pleasantly warm-and-fuzzy moments, but several missteps as well.

Hard-hearted Seattle policeman and dog handler Lt. Spencer Watley, killed in action, must now serve a sentence of "Jerk Redemption Time" on earth before he can enter heaven. At the insistence of the Heaven's Gate Keeping Angel, he must do so in the body of his murdered police dog, Pepper. In his earthly guise, Watley pledges to help fourteen-year-old Justin Andrews adjust to a life without his recently deceased mom and with only minimal emotional support from his workaholic dad. An innocent victim in a car accident near the scene where Watley died, Justin ends up in leg braces and now gets around on a scooter. Justin is two school grades ahead of his peers and a computer whiz to boot. Watley and Pepper had been trying to catch a thug fleeing from a crime scene when they died, and Pepper swallowed a critical piece of evidence at the time. That evidence was the Z-3, an electronic component needed to make the Robo Pooch—a toy that criminals plan to use to steal funds electronically from private bank accounts.

The chase to recover the Z-3 from Pepper's (now Spencer-Pepper's) belly has sufficient action, fast-paced dialogue, and cinematic scenes to appeal to its intended audience of tweens and teens. The more mature among them, however, will question several abrupt cutaways and chance encounters that aren't as believable in narrative form as they might be in a movie.

Techno-savvy problem-solver Justin, his empathetic, kickboxing, sixteen-year-old sister, Vicky, and their stressed-out Dad, Eugene, are all believable, well-developed characters. However, Drusilla, Rex, and T-Bone—the evil family owners of the Dreck Toy Factory where Eugene works and is being framed for the Robo Pooch crime—at times become one-dimensional caricatures engaged in slapstick antics.

Throughout, wisecracking Spencer with his new "leash on life" as Spencer-Pepper raises lots of giggles as he boorishly transforms his human routines to those of a butt-sniffing, coffee-slurping, misbehaving, floppy-eared Briard with an uncanny ability to communicate with Justin. Together they alternately follow and flee from the Drecks in their attempts to apprehend them and clear Eugene of the cybercrime. Along the way, Spencer-Pepper meets up with his own Dad, former Police Chief William Watley, also killed in action and reincarnated as a dog-cop. The father-and-son team gets to bring down a rogue policeman colleague of Spencer-Pepper's who is now in cahoots with the Drecks.

The book's stylized cover art is an irresistible come-on for the novel. It shows Spencer-Pepper in a police officer's cap and sporting dark glasses on his furry Briard face, his tongue dangling beside a "Starpups" coffee container. There are, however, a number of typographical errors within the text in *A New Leash on Life*.

In all, while the novel is an entertaining read for the kid-lit crowd, it doesn't fully live up to the magnetic pull of its cover and the powerful excitement of its opening line: "Justin Andrews' heart pounded so hard he thought it would punch out his throat."

M. WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (March 12, 2012)

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