

Ain't Seen the Sunshine

David Booth

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In the wake of a horrific tragedy that claims his family, Dr. John Henderson spends his days learning how to survive the reality of his loss. Frustrated by the apathetic response of the police, when a twist of fate brings an opportunity to seek justice right to his front door, Dr. Henderson sets out to do just that.

David Booth's thought-provoking novel, *Ain't Seen the Sunshine*, draws readers into the life of the doctor as well as the lives of those who eventually cross his path. Among these is Bobby Joe Wylands, a serial convict whose fear of abandonment consistently leads him astray; Buck Martinez, whose thoughtless teenage choices snowball into a lifetime of regret and loss of freedom; and Jean Ann Taylor, a traumatized but tough young woman who refuses to live as a victim even as she struggles to trust again. Each character is uniquely memorable and even Bobby Joe, whose actions are often both self-destructive and dangerous to those around him, garners reader sympathy as he earnestly struggles to find self-worth and acceptance.

As readers follow along with Dr. Henderson on his journey to find justice, Booth expertly weaves intriguing themes and realistic moments into his story. Most of the action takes place in and around a Texas prison, and the book's title, taken from Johnny Cash's iconic "Folsom Prison Blues," accurately describes the characters. Each one, from angry and grieving John Henderson to nice-guy prisoner Buck Martinez, is caught in a prison of one kind or another, and each suffers from a lack of hope. They capably convey the way destiny can seem to take control, as well as reveal the part of human nature which allows even the most bereft to consistently try to choose life over death, light over darkness. Each character in *Ain't Seen the Sunshine* struggles to overcome adversity and reach for that ray of hope, and their individual journeys prove compelling and affecting.

The novel is primarily character-driven, and Booth utilizes his characters well by giving them plenty of opportunity to be both articulate and insightful. For instance, when Dr. Henderson hears that prison gardener Buck is considered "harmless and broken-down," he doesn't buy it: "Maybe his body wasn't so much broken down as it was dormant, like one of his plants waiting for spring." This statement proves especially prophetic in an interesting way.

Although the narrative meanders through a few different time lines and story lines during the first third of the novel, things eventually come together effectively and the characters' connections to one another become clear. Each character is nudged toward a personal turning point where their paths will cross, either directly or indirectly, and the novel flows smoothly toward a satisfying and moving conclusion.

While a simpler initial structure could make the book easier to follow from the start, Booth's skills as an outstanding storyteller will likely overcome any possible reader confusion. Those who choose to forge ahead will find the journey rewarding.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (March 26, 2013)

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