

Amid the Ashes and the Dust

Clay Mitchell

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This story of suspense, trauma, quest, and secrets is expertly told by a debut author.

Clay Mitchell successfully blends the elements of a suspenseful mystery with the story of a man's struggle to overcome tragedy and loss in his compelling and thoughtful debut novel, *Amid the Ashes and the Dust*. Mitchell excels in portraying an evolving father-son relationship through a well-structured narrative where long-dead secrets are unearthed and a broken man seeks salvation.

Tyler Morgan is no stranger to hard times. His promising football career was cut short, his brother suffered life-changing trauma, and his girlfriend inexplicably left him. Through it all, Tyler held steadfastly to his faith, believing that God would see him through. He moves on to build a new and happy life, but his optimistic outlook is shattered the day he loses his young family. Leaving the home he'd always loved, he turns his back on everything, including his faith.

Five years after the tragedy, Tyler learns his mother is terminally ill, and he returns home to a town that blames him for his own despair. As he continues trying to drown his sorrows in booze and anger at God, Tyler soon begins to open his eyes to what is happening around him. The most powerful man in town, Lester Radcliffe, has been trying to take over the Morgan family's land for decades, and Tyler's father is close to finally giving in. Tyler's former love is trapped in an abusive marriage, and the town has turned a blind eye to her situation.

Feeling too lost to help anyone, Tyler plans to leave once again—until the day part of the space shuttle Columbia crashes into the Sam Rayburn Reservoir. Old secrets begin to surface, ultimately forcing Tyler to start fighting for his life, his faith, and his family.

Amid the Ashes and the Dust is nicely structured and the transitions between scenes depicting the present and past are clear and effective. Characterization is credible and thorough, particularly in regard to Tyler and his father, Charlie. Mitchell deftly portrays the complicated but loving relationship between father and son—the ways in which the men differ, as well as the areas where they find common ground. The evolution of their relationship is especially poignant and real.

Mitchell shines in his ability to create a suspenseful story. When Tyler, a diver, is asked to help with shuttle recovery efforts, he begins to feel, "For the first time in a long while, ... part of something outside of his own personal misery." Convinced the reservoir is hiding more than the sad remnants of the shuttle, Tyler's quest for the truth becomes increasingly dangerous for him and for those he cares about. Readers will find themselves fully invested in finding the truth behind the secrets of Tyler's past.

Though Mitchell's strong message of faith may seem heavy to some readers, it enhances Tyler's personal journey and highlights the peaks and valleys of finding strength amid seemingly endless tragedy and challenge.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (August 26, 2013)

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