

Axel Hooley's Death Watch List: A Sick Comedy

Scotty-Miguel Sandoe

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Axel Hooley's life has been far from simple. Of unknown parentage, he is found as a baby by an Amish couple who raise the mysterious child until he turns sixteen, when they push him out on his own. The following years encompass a wide variety of experiences that help Axel navigate through life and prepare him for his most daunting encounter—the approach of his death by cancer.

When Isaac and Annie Hooley found the abandoned infant at a local harvest fest, he seemed the answer to their perplexing problem. Their youngest son, Axel, had been tragically killed in a thresher accident on their farm. Birth and death records were rare in their community, but people knew the boy, so they naturally missed him and wondered what happened to him. Since Axel didn't have a birth certificate, the Hooleys simply named their newfound son Axel and he became the replacement for the original. Although New Axel was actually three years younger than Old Axel, the Hooleys figured that over time, nobody would notice the discrepancy. Such is the kind of confusion, mystery, and uncertainty that follows Axel through life.

At sixteen years old, Axel works for a couple who hire him to wash dishes in their restaurant but who constantly cheat and abuse him. By the time he's thirty-three, he's been employed as a male stripper, a massage therapist, and a cabinet installer, among other assorted short-lived jobs. Along the way, Axel lives with a pair of hippie college professors who expose him to new intellectual and cultural experiences.

But Axel's biggest challenge is battling cancer. When his death becomes imminent, he puts together a Death Watch List. He knows he will reach a point where he will have to depend on his friends to drive him to doctors' appointments and hospital visits and assist in other areas of his daily routine. As with everything else in Axel's life, it is a hodgepodge of personalities that is recruited.

Author Scotty-Miguel Sandoe masterfully weaves a story of friendship, perseverance, and hope, which he highlights with twists that are out of the blue but somehow remain believable and entertaining. He handles the topic of cancer with appropriately stark images, but never in a manner that tries to either trivialize or sensationalize the disease. His use of fantasy segments cleverly help pull together and resolve some of the story line's multiple subplots. Considering the meandering path of Axel's life, the author manages to bring the story to a satisfying close in the book's final scenes.

Sandoe's uncanny ability to smoothly switch back and forth between Axel's early years and his later battle with cancer allows the reader to understand why friends and family are so important to Axel. Although he never really had a supportive family or even a real identity while growing up, he was unknowingly forming a family throughout his life. Sandoe's wonderfully witty and creative style provides a well-paced, highly enjoyable novel that would most definitely appear on Axel Hooley's Must Read List.

JEFF FRIEND (November 21, 2012)

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