

Barely Breathing

Michael J. Kolinski

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Ethical questions give depth to the characters in this fascinating, gruesome mystery.

Jake Wood travels to Los Angeles to visit his cousin, but when he arrives, she is nowhere to be found. In this engaging mystery, *Barely Breathing*, Michael J. Kolinski deftly explores what happens when men become evil in the name of science, turning animal testing into torture and exploring the idea that kidnapping is the only way to keep their secrets safe.

The strength in this book lies in Kolinski's storytelling ability. The plot he weaves is believable and affecting, drawing the reader in just as the good guys are pulled toward the evil in the story. Wry humor and a romantic entanglement add depth and interest to what could have been just another run-of-the-mill missing relative mystery. Wood's relationship with Laurie, his missing cousin's best friend, makes their delay in looking for Jana even more plausible. They don't initially focus on the fact that she is missing, putting her absence down to her work, which gives them more time to be alone with each other.

Humor is vital in this book. The descriptions of animal abuse in the laboratory and the sexual scenes throw a pall over the narrative, but just when it seems that all is beyond the light, there are flashes of humor that make the events of the plot more realistic: "Laurie looked at me and rolled her eyes. 'Stop. Please stop. Will you please promise me that you will never utter another sports cliché to me ever again? I didn't like sports before I met you and now I loathe them.' 'Even figure skating and swimming?' I said with a wry smile on my face."

Even the villains are complex characters. Dr. Mirek, the head of the lab where Jana works and the keeper of the abused lab monkeys, is not just evil. His work introduces the ethical dilemma associated with helping mankind through animal testing. The case is made for both sides, although the horrors of the actual experiments seem to tip the scales in favor of the animals, along with Mirek's attempted use of a gorilla named Kong as an assassin. That said, the ethics question, along with his gambling problem, give Mirek more facets than just a typical mystery novel villain.

Kolinski has put together a slick package here. The text flows well and is free of any errors that might compromise the reader's enjoyment. In addition, the front cover hints at what actually occurs in the book. The table of contents that lists each chapter by number (without chapter titles) isn't necessary.

While the graphic torturing of animals is difficult to read, those searching for a mystery with a bit of romance will appreciate this offering.

LYNN EVARTS (March 18, 2014)

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