Clarion Review

General

Bash
Mike Bartos
Xlibris
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Ash Roper needs a good story if he wants to save the *Charley Town*, the weekly tabloid he and his wife publish. With the whispers of drug deals, corruption, escapes, and violence surrounding it, Bay Area State Hospital (BASH), a state-run hospital for the criminally insane, seems like the best place to get a newsworthy scoop. Ash begins to probe, but like much that happens in the hospital, his investigation goes awry, and with a storm brewing outside and in, more than the story is at risk.

Right from the beginning, author Mike Bartos simultaneously spurs readers' interest and gives relevant background details. Before even introducing the main characters, he delivers a brief account of a trial to determine a patient's freedom, followed by a story about a different patient's escape. In his depiction of those two events, as well as the hospital's internal response to them, Bartos presents questions and information that begin to mold readers' ideas about BASH and its residents.

Bartos maintains a high level of reader interest by introducing numerous intriguing elements. Not only is there a growing illegal drug presence at the hospital, but Ash is then stuck there himself due to a case of mistaken identity. To top it off, a massive hurricane might be on its way. Readers will be compelled to read onward and will be rewarded with resolutions and explanations for everything.

There are many characters in the book, and Bartos paints brief word portraits to bring each of them life them to life. Rarely do these characters seem unnecessary—more often, they emphasize that there are multiple sides to every story— but many relationships among characters are explained more than demonstrated. Bartos gives the main characters considerable substance as well; however, further authentic development of Ash would have enabled readers to connect with and care about the protagonist to a higher degree. Also, although much happens

to Ash, it would have created more tension if he were more involved in one of the most interesting aspects of the book, the drug conspiracy.

Bash offers sometimes scathing, sometimes absurdly comic, commentary about the bureaucracies in the state hospital and legal system in general. That Ash is stuck in the hospital to begin with is ridiculous, and Bartos shares many other instances in which “the system” simply gets in the way or makes things exponentially worse. Most disturbing is when the system fails entirely, leaving readers hoping that Bartos’s experiences as a physician and psychiatrist have not informed the work too literally.

Alicia Sondhi