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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

Benjamin: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves

Aaron Powell
CreateSpace (Aug 10, 2012)
Softcover $7.99 (84pp)
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Compact and tightly written, this work by former marine Aaron Powell is a chilling look at the inner world of a bullied and sexually abused teen who decides to take matters into his own hands to protect himself and those he loves from further abuse.

Benjamin is a student at Watkins Glen High School in upstate New York where he lives with his divorced mother, her alcoholic and abusive boyfriend, and their toddler son, Benjamin's half-brother. The family lives in a trailer surrounded by woods, streams, and hills, and it is only in that natural world that Benjamin manages to find solace when his life seems to be spinning out of control. Verbal and physical abuse at the hands of his mother's boyfriend and daily bullying on the school bus has taken its toll.

Though suspicious of his math teacher's intentions, Benjamin is powerless to disobey the demand that he remain after school for detention; the boy's worst fears are realized when the teacher locks the classroom door and sexually abuses him. With the realization that he is truly alone, and that no one, not even God, will stop the abuse, Benjamin contemplates suicide, but decides instead to take matters into his own hands. Applying the skills he has learned in the woods, he uses his fertile imagination and an amazing amount of logic to design what appears to be a perfect way to end the abuse.

Powell, the author of four other books, is a gifted and sensitive writer who describes his protagonist's sexual awakening with tenderness: "When she turns to face the class again, her eyes are on me, and I wonder if there's a way I could be with her…She delicately moves her golden curl behind her ear, and I wink at her, causing her to blush. I immediately regret doing this and bury my face in my arms on my desk."

Powell is able to mobilize all the reader's senses with few words, and the potency of his story is enhanced by its sparseness. The author's acute observational skills and Marine Corps training lend authenticity to his vivid descriptions of Benjamin's revenge. Taken along with the graphic depictions of sexual abuse and murder, many are likely to find the novel a disturbing read.

Examples of the book's few errors include "a cool breeze" where the text should read "the cool breeze," and "pet" where the past tense "petted" should be used. Of greater concern is the somewhat awkward break between Benjamin's near suicide and cry to God for help and his awakening from unconsciousness with his knife stuck into a pine tree. The addition of a transitional sentence with some reference to what he perceives or feels as all goes black would have improved the book's flow.

The powerful, attractive cover art conveys the harsh winter environment in which the story takes place and the cold inner landscapes and societal conditions that make possible the abuse it relates. Those who work with troubled or bullied youth would do well to read this insightful and disturbing look into the mind of one who, pushed beyond his limits and having no one, decides to help himself.

KRISTINE MORRIS (January 29, 2013)

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