Clarion Review

General

Boarding Pass
Paul Cumbo
One Lane Bridge Publications
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Well-drawn settings and relatable, engaging characters bring realism and clarity to an intelligent novel with an important message for teens and adults.

For college senior Matt Derby, a visit to a long-lost childhood friend and recollection of the past illumines the potential of youth, the significance of seemingly minute decisions and actions, and the ability of an individual to follow one's passions. Told mostly as a flashback of Matt's experience as a fifteen-year-old in a Catholic, all-boys boarding school, this excellently paced coming-of-age novel is an enjoyable read for late-teen and twentysomething readers looking for intelligent and thought-provoking fiction.

Boarding Pass begins with a twenty-one-year-old Matt who has just broken up with his longtime girlfriend and is about to graduate from college. When he recognizes on the news his old boarding school roommate, Trey Daniels, now a firefighter who has saved his estranged father from a burning hotel, Matt makes the split-second decision to fly to Wyoming to visit him.

Here the novel launches into a flashback that constitutes the majority of the book. It is likely the nostalgia that Matt already possesses at this turning point in his life that helps make the transition a smooth one. Starting his sophomore year at a private school on the East Coast, Matt finds himself rooming with Trey, who had been kicked out of his previous schools for deviance. Throughout the year, the two boys form a strong friendship that is beneficial to both but also tests their personal boundaries. Matt's Catholic upbringing has him holding his morals near and dear, while Trey's troubled childhood has made him bitter and often disrespectful, though confident in his individuality.

The final forty pages of the story find Matt in Wyoming, speaking with Trey and coming face-to-face with the life-altering decisions he must make regarding his ex-girlfriend and law

school. Matt's thought process in contemplating his choices, while logical, is influenced more by his emotions and aspirations rather than dry practicality, due to his encounter with Trey in this final section.

As a teacher at a boarding school, author Paul Cumbo is able to portray the environment that houses his characters skillfully and honestly. The challenges Matt and Trey face are relatable even to teens in public school and shape their beliefs and the directions their lives take realistically. Relationships with teachers and parents—such as Trey, resentful and distant, with his extremely wealthy father, and the boys with teachers, such as Brady, whom they simultaneously admire and admonish—are dynamic and conveyed through true-to-life dialogue and behaviors.

The boys, their decisions, experiences, and relationships all offer coming-of-age insight for teens and young adults revealed through an well-paced narrative. Flowing from optimistic to pessimistic and back again, and with tension growing as it progresses, the story told in Matt's engaging, sensitive voice begs to have its pages turned.

Matt's journey of self-discovery offers readers a moment of clarity, revealing the serenity that arises from understanding and following through with one's motivations.

Aimee Jodoin