



Cheater's Game

Paul Levine

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Cheater's Game is a ripped-from-the-headlines legal thriller in which the natural tension between a parent and his newly grown child takes a life-changing turn.

In Paul Levine's thriller *Cheater's Game*, a lawyer risks his career and his health to protect his thrill-seeking nephew from an unjust punishment.

Jake is an upstanding and productive Miami citizen. His nephew Kip, whom Jake raised from the age of nine, is not. When Jake learns that Kip is involved in falsifying college admission exams, he is determined to make Kip see sense before the federal government catches him. But Jake's mental health is failing, possibly as the result of brain damage incurred from his college football days, and Kip is uninterested in Jake's concern. When the worst comes to pass, it takes all of Jake's legal training and street smarts to secure his nephew a second chance.

The story switches perspectives between Jake and his fiancée, Melissa, a neurologist working on a cure for Jake's illness. Jake's narration is snarky but vulnerable. His distress and regret over Kip's misbehavior is affecting; it fuels his every thought and action. Melissa's narration revolves around her research difficulties and emphasizes how much she loves Jake; it is far outweighed by Jake's narration in terms of space, and it relays little information that could not have been told from Jake's perspective.

Melissa and Jake's relationship is refreshing and trusting; not even a seemingly compromising photograph can drive a wedge between them. Jake's health problems make his interactions with others, each with their own secrets and motivations, interesting and unpredictable. Kip, meanwhile, swings from insufferable to penitent.

The book's ethnic jokes, one of which uses "gypsy" as a slur, are discomfiting. Some of the dialogue, especially from younger characters, is unrealistic. Expressed and uncritical admiration of Joe Paterno contradicts the crux of Jake's legal argument that illegality and immorality are two separate concepts.

Smooth, entertaining prose makes the story a pleasure to read. The courtroom scenes in particular fly by in a flurry of cross-examinations, colorful witnesses, and creative legal shenanigans as Jake tries everything that's allowed by law to save Kip. A shocking betrayal in the middle of the trial piles more pressure on Jake's unsteady shoulders. Clever foreshadowing hints at big twists without robbing them of their effectiveness. The trial races toward a conclusion that is both satisfying and startling.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (January 21, 2020)

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