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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ GENERAL FICTION

Falling from Heights

Chris F. Needham
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Told from two varying perspectives and identities this tale creates an unbreakable bond that stretches not only thousands of miles across Canada but across an entire generation.

A relative newcomer sophomore author Chris F. Needham presents a compelling and poignant tale that relates the personal struggles of a man and a woman on opposite sides of the country and some thirty years apart. Beginning in 2002 Needham transports the reader to North Delta British Columbia and the increasingly immigrant-populated suburb of Royal Heights. Having journeyed to the massive metropolis that is Toronto with dreams of becoming a successful actor Jeremy Jacks returns home to the increasingly violent community of Royal Heights believing his brother Robert to have been killed during a freak sky-diving accident. When Jeremy arrives he is shocked to find out that not only is his brother alive and well suffering only a broken leg but his father has been released from prison after being picked up for a minor vandalism charge.

At the same time the audience is introduced to the character of Birdie Cormack the newest specimen in an extremely controversial experiment in Toronto in 1972. She is a delightful young girl who misses her family and relates the details of her torrid everyday life to her parents through daily correspondence. Despite her innate optimism there is clearly something bothering her underneath her cool exterior. Gradually details of the bizarre experiment which sees the women locked inside a building for months on end receiving brain treatments and weaving belts for a mere 5 apiece are revealed in harrowing fashion. But ultimately Birdie's struggles are similar to those of Jeremy each one battling through their respective experiment in the hopes of coming out a better more loving individual in the end.

Needham is clearly a masterful creator of deep interesting and believable characters having created two extremely diverse individuals in this tale. By separating their time and place Needham sets the groundwork by which he will construct each character but never relies upon this separation as a crutch instead choosing to give each their own unique personality and voice that work to transcend time and place.

The book's one troubling aspect that can be easily adjusted is the bundling of all correspondence into a large mangled mess. With no chapter breaks to relieve the tension and distress that is built up for the majority of the tale the reader never has a chance to breathe and process everything they have just experienced. Also there is no consistent flow between entries and relating Jeremy's tale which takes place in 2002 through online blog entries created by a relatively unknown individual by the name of Lucy just adds to the confusion.

Nevertheless this tale is a remarkable glimpse into the lives of two rich and captivating characters each with their own personal demons to address through their own sociological experiments.

LIAM BRENNAN (April 21, 2008)

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