



From Paul to Saul

Joel McNenny

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From Paul to Saul is an engaging, faith-driven postapocalyptic novel.

In Joel McNenny's engrossing and thrilling dystopia *From Paul to Saul*, a new generation faces an uncertain future, directed by questions of faith, morality, and societal pressures.

In this alternate version of America, conservative Christians have wrested control of the nation; the Christian States of America replaced the Constitution with a system of rule directly overseen by the church. Josh lives a life of relative luxury thanks to his high-ranking father and his streamlined path to leadership within the government. Meanwhile, Maggie flees from an abusive home and ekes out a living on the edges of society. The two teens' stories intertwine as they enter adulthood; both begin to see the CSA through different eyes, questioning the truth of what they've been taught.

The book's world building is engaging, and its faith-based government is a compelling feature to which the populace adjusts with seeming ease, maintaining just enough familiar elements to make the work relevant. While the premise of the story is dystopian, much of it is seemingly drawn from the headlines. Josh and Maggie are the first generation to grow up under an entirely Christian rule; they have a unique perspective on the dangers of blind faith in both religion and politics, and the narrative handles such perspectives without becoming preachy. It switches between their points of view deftly.

Grounded characters behave realistically and exhibit believable growth. Josh's childhood friends are prime examples of the book's ability to make even minor characters feel dynamic. As Josh grows, he grapples with the question of whether society is even worth trying to fit into; this struggle is fantastically rendered.

Dialogue is distinct and flowing; characters have their own voices, personalized down to tics in their speech. Biblical slang is employed but fits awkwardly with the rest of the text; understanding it in context often requires flipping to the book's glossary, which is disruptive to the story.

Faith is an important part of the narrative, and its prominence may be off-putting to those outside of the Christian religion. The book's world's religious infrastructure and tenets aren't adequately explained, which makes it difficult to understand certain character motivations. Josh's crisis of faith and Maggie's family troubles are more universal themes.

The story is evenly paced and resolves well, though the resolution doesn't include much perspective beyond the bounds of the CSA and the book's global power dynamics remain murky. Instead, an epilogue focuses on Josh's developing worldview. The book's time frame is unclear; the transition to the CSA seems framed within a generation or two from now, but there's not enough background to explain how the change occurred.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (June 26, 2018)

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