

## God\*s Will: Based on a True Story

**Matthew John Echan**

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Based on a true story, Matthew John Echan's novel *God\*s Will* probes religious fanaticism, and the suffering inflicted in its name.

Fourteen-year-old Sam is told by his adoptive mother than he's going to spend some time with his godfather on a farm in rural Missouri, but it is all a ruse. Concerned by his secular listening habits, cursing, and preoccupation with basketball and girls, Sam's mother has arranged for him to be enrolled at Mount Zion Baptist Boarding Academy, a reform school for troubled teens. His head shaved, his mail monitored, and his clothes replaced with a uniform, Sam is thrust into a violent world of fire-and-brimstone sermons and barbed-wire fences from which it seems there is no escape.

In order to survive, Sam bites his tongue and plays along, trying to stay on the good side of the staff and his more aggressive fellow students. Still, teenage boys will be teenage boys, and he winds up in trouble more than once for cursing or being caught looking at the girls, with whom they are not allowed to communicate or associate in any way.

As his time at Mount Zion drags on, its doctrine of fear begins to take hold of Sam's psyche, and he struggles to hold onto who he was—and who he still hopes to be—without letting Mount Zion break the spirit it claims to save.

Though the novel is fictionalized, the horrors of reformatory programs are rooted in reality. Sam adapts to the physical and psychological abuse, rationalizing the way he and his fellow students are treated. The response to and impact of trauma portrayed is painful in its realism.

A gut-wrenching novel about the perils of faith bereft of love, *God\*s Will* testifies to resilience in adversity, and is a harrowing condemnation of all who choose to close their eyes to suffering.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (July / August 2020)

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