



Guardian of Deceit

William H. Coles

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Through the tumult caused by those around him, Darwin seems able to maintain his innate goodness.

In *Guardian of Deceit* by William H. Coles, sixteen-year-old orphan Darwin Hastings finds himself—and his enormous trust fund—transferred to the care of his older, brutish cousin Luther.

As a famous pro football player awash in money, Luther lives in a multiwinged East Hampton estate. Acting on his belief that nothing should come easily, Luther relegates Darwin to living in a barely-lit storage room and sets him to work as a servant, withholding the allowance that Darwin's trust fund stipulates. What's a brilliant self-starter orphan with his sights set on medical school to do?

From this setup, the book devolves into numerous minor plot threads. Although Darwin remains the central character, subplots revolving around other characters are introduced and abandoned before being sufficiently woven into the story. This is especially noticeable in the final third of the book, when a minor character who's not been mentioned for over a hundred pages goes missing and Luther's head of security leaps into the role of self-appointed detective, turning the bulk of the final third of the book into a police procedural with an anticlimactic resolution and reducing Darwin's story to a cameo wrap-up.

Settings lack focus. The action is supposed to take place amid Hamptons wealth with a strong dose of old money, but the over-the-top ostentation bears a stronger resemblance to Hollywood, while the WASP-wealth grace notes seem decades out of date. A sloppy timeline creates further confusion when, early in the book, Darwin states that thanks to private tutors he's already graduated from high school—but then spends most of the book working toward high school graduation.

Darwin's exaggerated brilliance and goodness are pitted against equally exaggerated venality in other characters. Luther is a thug whose lovemaking leaves bruises, blood, and emotional wreckage. Luther's girlfriend, Sweeney Pale, is a sweet but needy pop singer who is willing to absorb physical and emotional abuse for the payoff of marrying Luther.

Other women characters seem borrowed from a bygone era. Helen, the daughter of Darwin's mentor, is a student at New Hampshire's academically rigorous Exeter, but her activities revolve around maintaining a good tan and a tennis-toned body. The description of Helen's flirty younger sister, Coral, as "a femme fatale in a barnyard of creatures in heat" is sure to rile even lukewarm feminists. Melanie Pearlstein, Darwin's older tutor and first love interest, seduces and abandons him in order to marry a good Jewish boy.

Through it all, Darwin seems able to maintain his innate goodness, acting as the book's moral compass. Yet there are moments when that goodness crosses the line into dubious passivity. When Luther sends him to clean up the women he's left torn and traumatized, Darwin remains detached. When his mentor commits malpractice and destroys records to avoid a lawsuit, Darwin remains silent to keep the doctor's favor, even though he no longer needs it. At other times,

the fact that Darwin is so easily manipulated throws his judgement and fitness to be a doctor into question.

Illustrations by Betty Harper and Peter Healy are fine in themselves, but the wide mix of styles adds to the unfocused feeling of the story.

At the end of *Guardian of Deceit*, Darwin seems to have found a toehold to the happiness and fulfillment he wants, but the long slog has made it clear that nothing is certain.

SUSAN WAGGONER (March 1, 2018)

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