

Jack and Jill Went up the Hill

George Pegg

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The life of a hard-core drug addict is not pretty. George Pegg knows this and pulls no punches in this short novel “made from true facts.” *Jack and Jill Went Up the Hill* is a gritty, realistic story that drops readers unmercifully into the cruel chaos of a junkie’s life and shows what an uphill battle the addict must fight to leave that life behind.

The story opens on Jo and Elle, who start their day planning how much shoplifting and pickpocketing they will do to get what they need. Elle needs heroin and Jo needs booze, and they need it more than they need to shovel out their sad, smelly apartment with its “corner full of vodka bottles” and a “carpet that was fit only for burning.” Their addictions escalate over the course of the story in a grim portrayal of the downward spiral suffered by many real-life addicts.

Pegg uses coarse language and confrontational dialogue to express the urgency of the day: get drugs or get violently ill from withdrawal symptoms. Nothing else matters. Elle and Jo are not into drugs for fun now, if they ever were. All they want to do is avoid illness. Ironically, Elle’s desperation lands her in the hospital, where she just might have a chance to overcome her problems. The author never paints Elle’s recovery as inevitable, but he does offer a glimmer of hope for her to seek a different way of life.

While Pegg captures the cadence of street language and the jargon of addicts “clucking for some H,” he doesn’t pay adequate attention to grammar and punctuation. His characters pose questions that end in periods, and they speak in confusing run-on sentences that cry out for commas. Pegg’s writing is also riddled with inappropriate homophones, like “waist of time,” that distract from the storytelling. Sometimes, though, his mistakes are perhaps intentional, as when he uses “no” in place of “know.” The addicts’ world is all about the “no,” so it makes a certain poetic sense that they would eschew knowledge in favor of negation. Closer editing would allow Pegg’s urban energy to come through more consistently.

Cover art featuring a clean-cut, smiling couple rolling down a grass-covered hill belies the troubled lives and impoverished urban landscape of the characters described within. The cover copy is equally disconnected from the content, with a plot synopsis that calls the main character “Emma” when she is known as “Elle” throughout the novel.

Pegg’s story, while unrelentingly realistic about the odds against recovering from serious addictions, also offers suggestions for fixing a broken system, from a plea for better emergency services to a provocative call for the legalization of all drugs. A recovering alcoholic himself, Pegg clearly understands addiction and the vicious cycle that traps addicts, as well as a few ways out of the mess. *Jack and Jill Went Up the Hill* could be helpful supplemental reading for medical students and counselors-in-training who may not otherwise understand the dire situation many addicts face.

SHEILA M. TRASK (April 16, 2013)

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