



Josh's Wall

Cliff Ashpaugh

Spout Hill Press (July 2014)

Softcover \$14.95 (200pp)

978-0-615-98772-9

An Ender Wiggins-like character in a historical setting launches this novel into the realm of strong themes and lessons learned from bullying.

Cliff Ashpaugh's *Josh's Wall* is a multigenerational exploration of father-son relationships and the challenges of adolescence. It's a swift read containing ample space for initiating important conversations, particularly around bullying and personal responsibility.

One night as he's drifting to sleep, Michael hears a rustle by his bedroom door. His father has just delivered him the manuscript of his childhood story, accompanied by a note containing a few reading guidelines and a letter to be opened later. Displaying incredible restraint, Michael sets that last letter aside and delves into his father's tale.

It opens in his father's sixth year. Young Josh awakens from a coma brought on by an allergic reaction to penicillin and is found to be suffering from selective amnesia. He must relearn his place in his unfamiliar family and amongst unfamiliar classmates. A schoolyard bully targets him for reasons beyond his comprehension, so Josh's father enrolls Josh in karate classes.

But self-defense gives birth to a bad reputation, which, Josh writes, is "like a living entity." Soon everyone wants to take Josh on. Grown-ups in the school flay him academically for the troubles he seems to cause, while his parents work to defend his honor at every turn.

Josh's ambivalence when it comes to fighting takes on a quality evocative of Orson Scott Card's work. A modern day Ender Wiggins, Josh eventually decides that a strong defense is not reason enough to cause pain. His change of heart comes too late to prevent certain family disasters, and the last pages of Josh's story wind toward a sad realization for Michael.

Chapters often seem to function as independent stories, all of which are engaging, if transitions between them don't always result in great cohesion. Ashpaugh brings all of the mysterious plot elements Josh faces just out of the hospital back to bear in final moments, and their various resolutions are both satisfying and duly surprising.

In the end, it's adult Josh's story line which results in awkward moments. The young man winding his way toward responsible adulthood proves a little too self-congratulatory when he gets there, comparing his manuscript to Pulitzer Prize-winning ones and expressing frustration toward unreceptive publishers.

Still, Ashpaugh brings young Josh's world to life skillfully, from the frustrations of dealing with amnesia to the joviality of youth. It's an all-around provocative and enjoyable read.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Fall 2014)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword

Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.