

Not My Ruckus

Chad Musick

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Not My Ruckus is an incisive novel that probes people's dark motivations, but ends with hope.

Chad Musick's *Not My Ruckus* is a brutal, potent psychological drama about abused teenagers, revenge, and friendship in 1980s Texas.

Fourteen-year-old Clare is an undiagnosed autistic tomboy with epilepsy. She has an older brother, Frank. Their parents withhold food and justify their punishments with religion. On the day that Clare befriends Esther, a neighbor who also faces cruelties, both of their mothers are involved in an alleged carjacking. The adults' complicity in what happened leads to irreparable damage. As Clare tries to save Esther from further harm, tragic truths which bind both families together are uncovered.

With elements of modern noir and gothic horror that include a powerful man's predatory behaviors, which impact several people in town, and a character's misguided atonement for doing wrong in the past by permitting additional wrongs in the present, the novel goes to volatile extremes in a plausible manner. Abuse is handled in a frank way, including a near drowning and incest, with scenes unfolding like a controlled burn. Such acts result in a multifaceted text in which the lines between pure evil and abusers who have been victims, too, is blurred. The book's teenagers struggle with their desire to flee, but they have few resources, and their relationships and mixed ideas about indebtedness bind them to their present circumstances.

Clare's sometimes innocent yet forthright perspective is compelling from the moment she declares, "I've always been ready to run." Her voice is sharp and vulnerable, and her eagerness to latch onto Esther is a poignant example of her loneliness and loyalty. She's impulsive—just as quick to pull a trigger as she is to admit when she's been rash—but also fixated on finding revenge. As the novel progresses, she becomes more wise, and her edges soften. Her adolescent confusions about love and other emotional states are touching, and her survival instincts, despite her repeated neglect, prompt her toward brave foolhardiness.

Some of the book's developments arise with too little setup, including a manipulative overdose, a critical fire, and a culprit's eleventh-hour pursuit of Clare that brings relief through the promise of finding eventual justice. Other plot threads recede; while it's implied that the women's lies staved off the police, the carjacking that incited the book's complicated fallout is uninvestigated and brushed aside. Ultimately, the story is rewarding because of Clare and Esther's friendship. Though their homes are fraught with hidden histories, their relationship is a compelling oasis for both.

With its foreboding explorations of abuse and its effects, *Not My Ruckus* is an incisive novel that probes dark motivations, but ends with hope.

KAREN RIGBY (December 14, 2020)

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