

Not the Usual Season

Nancy May

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*In the sports-focused young adult novel *Not the Usual Season*, a young man struggles to triumph over the difficulties of adolescence.*

In Nancy May's coming-of-age novel, *Not the Usual Season*, a dedicated wrestler learns who he is and what he is capable of.

Heading into his senior year, Ben is eager to win the state wrestling championships, which he hopes will increase his chances of being accepted into the United States Naval Academy—a longtime dream of his. The championships are charged for Ben on multiple levels: he will be pitted against Adam, a longtime rival who beat him the previous year by cheating; and Ben's failure to report the transgression weighed on his heart and had an impact on his self-esteem. He also hopes to redeem himself through winning and through speaking out if Adam breaks the rules again. In addition, Ben and his teammates adjust to having the first girl wrestler among them, a situation that causes tension among the team members and between Ben and his girlfriend.

But when Ben's best friend and fellow wrestler, JT, a talented and confident young man whom Ben often finds himself envious of, is killed in a car accident just before the championships, Ben discovers an inner strength he did not know that he had. He musters the determination to face his nemesis with courage and a composure, and he secures newfound belief in his own abilities. This inner strength allows him to overcome other disappointments, and it releases Ben from the pressure of winning to impress outsiders. Finally, Ben feels free to perform to his best ability, and for no one's satisfaction but his own.

Ben narrates, his tone straightforward as he recounts events in a detailed manner. This is especially true when he describes the wrestling matches themselves; it's clear that he has an extensive knowledge and understanding of the sport. However, his voice, in its bluntness, is also dispassionate, and the story evades emotional depth, even in its descriptions of events like the death of Ben's friend. Ben's interactions with his girlfriend are also detailed in cold terms, despite their ages and hormones.

The book's secondary emphasis on Christian themes, including church attendance and biblical references, is an ill fit with the rest of the story; these elements seem to have little impact on the characters or their trajectories. Sexist references to girls as "chicks" and "babes," along with a casual mention of a Nazi salute, are disturbing elements in the story.

In the sports-focused young adult novel *Not the Usual Season*, a young man struggles to understand what it means to grow up and to triumph over the difficulties of adolescence.

RANDI HACKER (December 15, 2020)

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