ForeWord Reviews

JUVENILE FICTION

Picture Perfect
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Perfectionism, greed, child abuse, and deception are sad realities of modern America. Teens who know these realities seek ways of escape. Fifteen-year-old Ian and his only friend, Teddy, seek to take the perfect photo of a California redwood tree as their escape-Ian from his dominating father who happens to be the school principal, and Teddy from his alcoholic mother and mysteriously unknown father.

When Teddy disappears, Ian sees his friend in his dreams, hears strange voices, and has trouble recalling anything about the day his best friend suddenly came up missing. “Sometimes I sort of zone out,” he says, “kind of like those Indian fakirs who go into a trance so they can walk on hot coals. I lose time in a fog when that happens, and I don’t even remember if I’ve done things.”

Ian’s father, who tries to present himself as the perfect candidate for the highly prestigious job of school superintendent with the perfect son and wife, tragically controls Ian’s life. “Dad really comes across like the perfect principal he wants to be,” says Ian. “I worked so hard to find the school Ian this morning that I see Dad’s public image clearly today, too. He’s one person here and one person at home.” When Ian doesn’t measure up, he is forced to sleep in the closed closet under the steps (“It’s just a storage closet … but it has another purpose in Dad’s house”) or to smash possessions that are dear to him.

The author, who lives in Indiana, is the author of numerous magazine articles as well as both novels and non-fiction books for young people, including a biography of Davy Crockett. Her novel Counterfeit Son was the winner of the 2001 Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Young Adult Mystery.

In this book, Ian eventually gains the courage to show the legal authorities how a “perfect father” would do anything, even attempt murder, to maintain an image.

Ian’s story is a well-crafted mystery with bits of foreshadowing dropped here and there to keep the reader guessing, but not really knowing until the end. True to the mystery story form, each chapter ending leaves the reader wanting to read on. Ironically, the last scene is the

“perfect picture” of Ian’s father being led away by the police: “‘So much for being superintendent,’ one of the reporters mutters.”

With its accurate portrayals of teen life and anxieties, Picture Perfect is the perfect mystery novel for middle school readers.

Linda Cooley