

Scary, Man

Jeffrey Hickey

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A story within a story; flawed, complex characters and taut, believable dialogue make this novel stand out.

Scary, Man tells the story of a good man whose life is dogged by nasty rumors of sexual deviancy, even after he moves his family to another town. Jeffrey Hickey carefully crafts a plot with believable dialogue and a pace that slowly builds to a satisfying conclusion.

Griffin Donnelley is a writer and storyteller. He adores his wife and daughter with a love that shines through even the scary tales he relates to classrooms of young children. These students delight in his voice abilities and connect with him on a fundamental level even he does not truly comprehend. He may be too nice, though, for he finds himself manipulated into babysitting a group of “tweenagers” at a rustic summer camp. Miserable and resentful, Griffin does his best to mentor the boys, although the beautiful young teacher he meets at the camp has her own designs on Griffin’s embattled reputation. Little does he know that his encounters at the camp will be the most important of his life.

The dialogue, especially the way Griffin talks to youngsters as more than just children, is taut and believable. For example, when asking a troubled fifth-grade girl to dance at the camp, sensing this is what she needs to heal, she tells him, “No. This is embarrassing. Go away.” To which Griffin replies, “Well, that’s a relief. I don’t want to dance, either.” This unexpected retort softens the girl, who relents and dances with the humorous adult. With that simple but profound act, the girl’s life is forever changed.

The book’s development seems a bit plodding at first, as the author takes considerable time to put the diverse elements of his tale into place. But he pulls the threads together nicely. The story begins with a day in the life of a seemingly average guy and builds to one that tackles such heavy issues as pedophilia, child abuse, alcoholism, marital infidelity, and homosexuality. The protagonist’s grappling with these social issues as several years pass is skillfully told, for Griffin finds that even people who commit reprehensible deeds may be more sympathetic than they seem. Griffin learns that he must acknowledge the harm caused by his own misconceptions and hurtful conduct before he can overcome the misbehavior of others.

The unique use of a story-within-a-story device is also noteworthy. Griffin seeks to publish a book titled *My Blood*, which would showcase the impact his donated blood had on people who received it. From the idea’s inception to Griffin’s dealings with the publishing industry and the duplicitous medical director of the blood center, the often frustrating life of a writer lends verisimilitude to Griffin’s struggles with money woes and alcoholism.

From the nadir of his personal and professional life, Griffin’s redemption builds to a satisfying conclusion. *Scary, Man* is recommended to those who enjoy the development of flawed, complex characters who must overcome adversity on many fronts.

ALAN COUTURE (November 26, 2013)

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