

Scary Spring: Our Polio Fright of 1955

C. A. Hartnell

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A historical tale about polio for middle graders, Scary Spring stays true to lighthearted aspects of its era.

In the spring of 1955, polio ravaged the United States, and Carol Ann, in C. A. Hartnell's middle grade novel *Scary Spring: Our Polio Fright of 1955*, worries about catching it herself.

Over the course of a few weeks, Carol Ann learns about polio—from her aunt, who is a research scientist; through written materials; and in school—and contemplates the sharp pain of an imminent needle while researchers desperately seek a vaccine. Still, Carol Ann—aside from her phobia of needles—is more concerned with her friends, siblings, and school than she is with the disease. *Scary Spring* follows her as she plays, learns, and grows.

Discussions of polio and the polio vaccine run throughout the book, but none of the main characters are affected, and the fear of it is a background issue until the end, when Carol Ann shows similar symptoms. Instead, the story's major concerns focus on a neighborhood puppy and decisions of what games to play or treats to buy.

Each chapter depicts a meandering scene from Carol Ann's days, or those of her friends and family members, without anything overarching to tie them together. There's little more to the plot than these scenes; it functions as a vehicle for occasional scientific and historical information, but does not otherwise sustain interest.

Exposition, narrative background, and plot points are relayed through dialogue or Carol Ann's thoughts. This form of narration is awkward, and the pacing is slowed when Carol Ann's often repeating thoughts interrupt the scenes. The dialogue is choppy, used to explain what characters want to do and touching on their worries.

Carol Ann is an endearing, engaging, and well-rounded lead, but her perspective is not suited to the book's educational purposes. Her naivety and lack of exposure to accurate information about the disease make learning from her complicated. Other characters, including Carol Ann's friend Pete and the adults in her life, fill in details of daily life without providing variety or tension.

The culture and atmosphere of the 1950s are captured in depictions of the local diner, with its "black and white checkerboard design" and "red vinyl booths, paired with chrome-edged tables." Neighborly behavior and children with the freedom to roam and play until dusk root the story in its time. The font of the chapter headings—which is cartoonish, with stars dotting the "i"s—and a glossary of terms and colloquialisms add to the 1950s feel.

Describing the joys of a fun-filled childhood, *Scary Spring* is a middle grade story that stays true to lighthearted aspects of the era in which it's set.

AIMÉE JODOIN (May 3, 2019)

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