

Secret Growth

Benton Savage

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It is tempting to compare Benton Savage's novel about a young man's journey through a mental hospital to Ken Kesey's 1962 story of psychiatry gone wrong, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Savage's *Secret Growth*, however, looks at the compassionate and hopeful side of mental health care today through the eyes of bipolar patient Arnold Humphrey. Unlike Kesey's Randle McMurphy, Humphrey not only survives the system but also learns to thrive because of the support he receives.

When readers first meet Humphrey, he is manically at work on a three-hundred-plus-page manuscript documenting his "proof" that the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were a charade orchestrated by the US government. His life quickly spins out of control, and he finds himself on the streets of New York City, homeless, paranoid, and, eventually, naked. Metaphorically, it is his chance to be reborn, to come out of the fantasy world in his head and learn to navigate the real world.

A wide variety of characters come along to help Humphrey grow, and Savage sketches them briefly but effectively. He uses gentle humor to soften an otherwise grim setting: a hospital ward for severely mentally ill patients. Humphrey becomes one of those patients, and his astonished observations paint a poignant picture of people in serious trouble. Nonetheless, many of them scramble for a treat from the weekly candy cart. These folks may not have many choices left, but they make the most of the ones they have.

Among Humphrey's unlikely saviors is Gilda Smith, who arrives at the hospital delighted that all these people have thrown her a party. Soon she is coming down from her manic high and trading book recommendations with Humphrey; they are both voracious readers and aspiring writers. Controversial books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, and *Venus in Furs* launch some very entertaining conversations. These exchanges flow easily, with seamless dialogue that feels absolutely real.

This authenticity is one of Savage's strengths. He provides real-life details that could have been gained only from personal experience or excellent research. Thus, readers learn some interesting things that may or may not ever apply to their own lives: It is easier to let your beard grow in the hospital than it is to jump through the hoops necessary to obtain a razor. And during a night in the homeless shelter, it is wise to anchor your shoes under the legs of your bed if you don't want to go barefoot the next day.

Humphrey's recovery proceeds steadily throughout the story, with little conflict and few setbacks, and the last pages of the book are less compelling than the first. By the time Humphrey leaves the hospital, his path is pretty clear.

A modern look at the way society can successfully support someone with a mental illness, *Secret Growth* can provide hope to patients, their families, and friends.

SHEILA M. TRASK (October 17, 2012)

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