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Young Adult Fiction

Short Circus
Stephen V. Masse
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When Jem Lockwood is faced with writing a composition about how he spent his summer vacation, he tells his teacher he could write a book. Much to his surprise, she agrees with him, and so for one whole semester he writes about the experiences he had with his brother Chris, his friends Gary and Peter, and Jesse, his Big Brother from the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization.

Jem's adventures include typical summer fun—camping, carnivals, swimming, and biking. Jem also has to deal with two major problems. First, someone is filling the swimming pond with broken glass and barbed wire. Second, Jesse's landlord has decided to sell his house, which will force Jesse to move. Jem leads his friends in their attempts to discover who is sabotaging the pond while simultaneously executing a bit of sabotage themselves by doing whatever they can to prevent potential buyers from wanting Jesse's house.

Author Stephen V. Masse has done a wonderful job of capturing the voice of twelve-year-old Jem. His summer vacation will remind adult readers of their own childhoods, when summer seemed endless and every day brought something new. Younger readers will find much to relate to as well. Jem does not always make good choices; he fights with his brother and learns life lessons that are similar to those that all young people deal with in their daily lives.

The heart of this book is the relationship between Jem and Jesse. Masse manages to convey the love these two share through actions rather than statements. Jem never tells Jesse he loves him, but the reader will have no doubt about his feelings. One particularly poignant demonstration occurs early in the book when Jesse is driving Jem and his friends home from a summer festival. Jem says, “On the way home, everybody slept all over everybody else. My head was on Jesse’s shoulder, Gary’s head was on my side, and Peter and Chris were conked out in the back seat. I didn’t sleep too long, but I rested just the same. I like to listen to Jesse sing along with the radio when he drives.”

Masse studied creative writing at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and won a silver medal in the 2008 Independent Publishers Book Awards for his book, A Jolly Good Fellow. In Short Circus, the author delivers another excellent story that captures all of the fun and excitement of summer vacation. Jem’s story is well named, since the summers of childhood are as brief and exciting as a circus.

Catherine Reed-Thureson