

Stealing Liberty: A Tragedy in Two Parts: Part One

Jack Augenblick

Lulu (Dec 26, 2019)

Softcover \$12.99 (178pp)

978-1-68471-547-3

Stealing Liberty is a funny and dramatic novel whose hero questions what it means to be an adult.

In Jack Augenblick's dark comedy *Stealing Liberty*, an unemployed man undertakes an adventure to do a probably illegal favor for a friend.

Oliver is under pressure: from his parents, who want him to get a job; from his girlfriend, Starla, who wants him to be more confident and less lazy; and from Starla's parents, who want him to propose. When Alex, a friend from middle school, shows up at his door, asking Oliver to do a favor for their mutual friend Marc, Oliver thinks it's a practical joke.

Marc saved Oliver from drowning when he was twelve; now, he wants Oliver to retrieve a package from a shipping company and deliver it to a mysterious location before next Wednesday. Suspense increases as Oliver receives nightly threats from Alex and Marc; these convince him that the scheme may not be a practical joke after all, and their violent nature raises the stakes of him following through.

With Starla urging Oliver to turn to the police, and the police and Oliver's retired detective grandfather urging him to go through with the delivery, Oliver feels trapped—both in his current predicament and in his not-quite-yet-adult life. New problems arise over the course of the book, too, pushing Oliver to reassess and to make more intense decisions. Excitement builds right up until the ending, which represents a release.

Oliver narrates, his voice full of sarcasm and self-deprecating humor. His depression shapes his worldview and his ambivalence about moving forward, but also imbues the book with biting wit, anger, and sadness, all mirrored in the absurdity of his situational comedy. Through his eyes, the world is gritty and strange. Starla is the perfect counter to Oliver; she is sweet to his bitter, motivated to his lazy, and she pushes him to be better even as she loses patience with him.

Alternating chapters follow Starla, Alex, and Marc as they navigate their problems and contemplate their relationships to Oliver. Their conversations with Oliver reveal years-long tensions that add depth to the story. However, the book's secondary characters, including Starla's coworkers and Alex's girlfriend, don't contribute to the story in a meaningful way, and the book's subplots, though they help to define characters' roles and personalities, impede the plot and slow its pace. Some of the book's recurring comments are repetitive.

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AIMEE JODOIN (October 5, 2020)

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