Clarion Review

Juvenile Fiction

Strange Seasons: Summer
Tom Wells
iUniverse
978-0-595-52016-9
Four Stars (out of Five)

Eleven-year-old Jimmy Stringer is ready to settle down. After four schools in six years, he's relieved when his father, an Air Force captain, assures him they are finished moving around. "We'll put down some roots for sure this time, Jimbo," he says. "The brass promised me this'll be the last stop for a while." However, when his dad disappears on a "special assignment" the Air Force suddenly refuses to acknowledge, Jimmy soon realizes staying put in Cypress City, Texas, will be more of an adventure than he ever imagined.

Set in 1961, *Strange Seasons: Summer* is the first book in a planned series by author Tom Wells. A college professor and author of two previous novels, Wells creates an appealing and nostalgic coming-of-age tale, weaving a suspenseful science fiction story around his young protagonist's adolescent challenges and relationships. Descriptions are vivid and true to the time period, deftly immersing the reader into small town life of the early 1960s, when evenings were spent flipping through the pages of *Boys' Life* and *Archie* comics or piling into the family's Catalina for a trip to the Dairy Mart.

Jimmy and his mother are left on their own to deal with the aftermath of his father's disappearance. Forsaken by the Air Force, which circulates rumors that Captain Stringer has deserted and willingly left his family, Jimmy is comforted by the oath his father made before he vanished: "But here's the deal, straight up. I'm coming back, and you can't forget that for one second while I'm gone, no matter how long." Strange shooting stars, government conspiracies, and the shocking explosion of a Chihuahua are merely a few of the disturbing events that add to the mystery. With the help of two good friends and the eccentric and enigmatic Professor Slobod, Jimmy sets out on a mission to discover the truth and reunite his family.

Wells gives his unique story an authenticity that resonates, resulting in a refreshing departure from the wizards, dragons and vampires currently inhabiting juvenile fiction

bookshelves. The intriguing, multi-layered tale deals with everything from time travel and alien visitations to father/son relationships and the power of perseverance. Jimmy's personal growth is skillfully drawn, sensitively portraying a boy on the verge of becoming a self-assured young man. His relationships to those around him, particularly the entertaining and knowledgeable Professor Slobod, are well realized and enjoyable.

While likely too intense and detailed for very young readers, *Strange Seasons* is well-written and engrossing, with enough wisdom and humor to appeal to both young adults and their parents. A slightly older protagonist as well as a more subtle approach to the novel's cover art may serve to attract the enthusiastic audience the story deserves. The writing flows smoothly and leaves the reader engaged in Jimmy's story and invested in following where it leads in the sequels to come. A promising beginning to an original and inventive saga.

Jeannine Chartier Hanscom