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Teen Angst? Naaah: A Quasi-Autobiography

Ned Vizzini
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“A rock concert should be counterculture and youth-driven—not something you invite your mother to. Rock is the opposite of mothers.” If this sounds like an insider observation about teen thinking, it is. It comes from a Woody Allen-type wit—emanating from an astonishingly young writer who initially put down rants about his “boring, scary, embarrassing high school moments” to comfort himself and take control. His rants-cum-sophisticated-and-very-funny essays quickly caught the attention of the New York Press and the New York Times Magazine leading to a book contract at age nineteen.

Angst begins early. “Starting in first grade there are all sorts of pressures—to be smart, make friends and have teachers like you. Kids develop different ways of coping with that pressure. Some find solace in books. Some play-act or play large and expensive musical instruments. Others draw, sing or do math. I coped with childhood by playing Nintendo.” Bright, perhaps “a bit weird,” the author finds humor in the minutia of daily experiences as he copes with puberty, hormones, parents, siblings, school, and his own talents.

Vizzini writes about the angst of taking an admissions test for high school. He “obsessed” about preparing himself after trying a practice exam. He studied the pre-test book while he was at summer camp, “participating in routine camp activities but in the back of my mind, thinking 1/13 = 0.0769.” He learned vocabulary through “E” and even studied during the family vacation. He was admonished, however, by a “flubbery” old woman, “This is a beach! Enjoy yourself.”

The book has interesting asides—pullout quotes by the author set on most pages. One relating to his essay on the admissions test defines flubbery. “It’s that look old people get when their necks hang down, and the arms hang down, and they appear to be melting in their own skin.” Other asides include his humorous commentary or useful information such as Websites.

Vizzini writes about applying to college, friends of convenience (“the friends you tell your parents you’re staying with when you’re really doing something illicit”), his “short and brutal history with television,” and his efforts to go on a class trip to Cancun instead of playing Jesus in a church play.

There’s much for teens (and shhh!, adults) to enjoy in this offbeat and entertaining collection of essays that touch on experiences common to the angst of growing up.

LINDA SALISBURY (July / August 2000)

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