

Thanks for the Pain: One Rape Victim's Wrath

Josh Gates

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Rape is a tough subject for any writer to address. Welfare-fraud investigator and former probation officer Josh Gates approaches the subject from the point of view of a lonely and troubled woman in his new novel, *Thanks for the Pain: One Rape Victim's Wrath*. It features an inventive narrative structure and a series of strange, beguiling allegories that illuminate the struggle and pain of all victims.

The novel opens with eighteen-year-old Scarlett cutting herself after suffering some unknown trauma. Switching between Scarlett's first-person account of events and third-person narration, Gates reveals a troubling relationship between Scarlett and her father. The father shares with his daughter dark secrets from their family history, many relayed in allegories, so that Scarlett may understand why her mother abandoned them. Fleeing the house in the middle of this family drama, Scarlett is raped by a stranger. The rest of the book chronicles Scarlett's adult life as she copes both with the trauma of the rape and her difficult personal relationships.

The book jumps so quickly into Scarlett's pain and dysfunction that the result is jarring. Scarlett is less a real character and more an abstract concept of suffering. Her dialogue is stilted and clichéd. "Why must you insist on dramatics, Father?" she asks, sounding more like a Victorian lady than a modern teenager. By the time the narrative reveals the rape, having woven a tangle of backstory and subplots, the scene is portrayed so matter-of-factly that it lacks any visceral sense of trauma. "I didn't mean to be rude. Thank you for checking on me," Scarlett tells a bystander immediately after the assault.

That the characters feel more like abstractions works well with the allegorical stories that make up Scarlett's family history. In these intermittent chapters, the writing shines with the simplicity of parable. "You give me all this authority over your life through your blame, yet I have not spoken a word," a planet tells a disaffected moon in "Anger." With great imagination and philosophical insight, Gates explores concepts such as love, pain, death, and fear, generating a unique body of wisdom literature.

Outside of these imaginative flights, the book shows more than one glimmer of grounding Scarlett's story in something real. In the first chapter, Scarlett describes what looks like an arched door in a weeping willow, "through which I could enter and enjoy both the shade and the beams of light glistening through the foliage." The image is more poignant for what it says about the desire to escape than all the passages in which Scarlett generically declaims how sad she is. Combining a grittier sense of realism with the intermittent allegories would make for a more impactful novel. Nonetheless, *Thanks for the Pain* is a decent read that could help parents and teenagers trying to work through painful experiences.

SCOTT NEUFFER (November 24, 2015)

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