

That's Not a Feeling

Dan Josefson

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Summer camps and boarding schools are ideal settings for fiction; the removal of parents from the equation expands the possibilities significantly. *That's Not a Feeling*, by Dan Josefson, combines that isolated sense of setting—The Roaring Orchards School for Troubled Teens in Webituck, New York—with subversive satire to skewer psychobabble while telling the tales of Benjamin, a former suicidal teen, and the school's other residents.

The title is a reference to one of the many pronouncements from Aubrey, the aged founder of Roaring Orchards. According to him, there are only seven feelings—happy, proud, confused, frustrated, scared, angry, and sad. Students' responses to the question "How does that make you feel?" are rejected when they don't correspond to the list. Aubrey has also instilled a culture rife with psychospeak and heavy acronyms. Fibs are "functioning intimacy blockers" and "wiggle" means "wonderful invitation to grow and gain a limiting experience." The students, and most of the faculty, spend much of the book trying to figure out the system ruling them.

That's Not a Feeling is Dan Josefson's first novel, but it comes with an impressive pedigree; the author won a Fulbright research grant and a Schaeffer Award from the International Institute of Modern Letters. The book sometimes reads like a cross between David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but Aubrey is no Nurse Ratched; at Roaring Orchards, no one, including Aubrey, seems to know quite why they do what they do.

Aubrey dictates that the students largely reprimand their own, and when confronting one of their peers who has attempted to run away from the school, they use the vocabulary of Roaring Orchards, twisting the psychological knife with guilt-inducing comments like: "I'm so hurt that you'd just leave, just throw me and everyone else here away like garbage."

Benjamin's best friend at the school, a girl named Tidbit, says about the enigmatic Aubrey: "at breakfast once, he came out of the bathroom with this long strip of toilet paper hanging out of the back of his pants ... But nobody said anything. When Aubrey finally sits down in his armchair at Campus Community and sees it you know what he says? ... 'I have never felt so alone.'"

Aubrey's complaint echoes similar feelings in Benjamin, Tidbit, and all the other troubled residents of Roaring Orchards. It's a testament to Josefson's skill that he manages to make us sympathize with his characters' frailties even as he pokes fun at their ridiculousness. Throughout the book, he crafts descriptions that get to the heart of their inner conflicts.

That's Not a Feeling is a terrifically funny book that doesn't fail to move the reader emotionally. Readers who enjoy dysfunctional reform schools, sharp writing, and literary humor should consider checking in.

PETER DABBENE (Fall 2012)

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