

The Apology Box

Naomi Ulsted

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The Apology Box is a poignant young adult novel about redemption, community, and moving forward after life-altering mistakes.

In Naomi Ulsted's coming-of-age novel *The Apology Box*, a sixteen-year-old girl works to recover from the biggest mistake of her life.

New to a small town in Oregon after her parents' divorce, Tessa is an A student, volleyball player, and violin prodigy who yearns to make new friends. She skips work to spend time with Cammie and a few of her popular friends, but ends up feeling like she's been dragged along just so Cammie can feel superior. In an effort to impress her popular peers, she grabs a firework and sets it off, inadvertently starting a devastating forest fire for which she is blamed. Sentenced to 3500 hours of community service, given a fine of \$450,000, and tasked with writing 228 apology letters to those affected by the fire, Tessa seeks to redeem herself while her mother falls into a deep depression.

As part of her community service, Tessa volunteers at a nursing home, where she cares for cranky Effby, with whose help she hopes to achieve redemption. Along the way, Tessa learns that not all problems can be solved, and not all mistakes are forgivable. Moving forward and pursuing a joyful, compassionate future is sometimes the only answer.

Tessa's is a bumpy road to self-forgiveness, full of troubling events and poignant adjustments. Tessa narrates, and her voice is deep and attuned to her surroundings. She is a spunky heroine, if not always one who's comfortable being herself around people her age. Her reactions to difficult situations—she shoplifts when she loses her job, for instance—evinces a strong survival instinct, though she still struggles to act in a moral manner, and longs to be loved. Her kindness toward Effby, and the love she has for her mother, are empathetic.

The narrative makes use of emotive foreshadowing and succinct sentences, tying its actions to complementary emotions well. Tessa's introspective narration is placed in the context of her circumstances and community, resulting in a captivating story. When those affected by the forest fire are hateful toward Tessa, she expresses understanding. And while she has trouble feeling like a part of her new community, she still sees the townsfolk, her classmates, and the nursing home people with nuance. Her ability to acknowledge that the people around her have lives as rich as her own is compelling, helping her to understand the full implications of her mistake.

A girl works to forgive herself in *The Apology Box*, a poignant young adult novel about redemption, community, and moving forward after life-altering mistakes.

AIMEE JODOIN (October 8, 2021)

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