



The Best Laid Traps

Philip La Croix

Eschler Editing

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Philip La Croix's thriller *The Best Laid Traps* is a dramatic story about revenge and hope set against a haunting Appalachian background.

Eighteen-year-old Edward has been picked on and bullied for most of his life because of his weight and complexion. This harassment extends to social media. On prom night, some of his bullies run him off of the road, leave him for dead, and cover their tracks.

When Edward wakes, he is lost in the mountains. He tries to survive wild animal attacks, starvation, and suicidal thoughts. He remains lost for six years but eventually leaves the isolation of the mountains to pursue vengeance.

From the beginning of the book, Edward is fleshed out via his relationships with others. He endures barbs including a lukewarm birthday card and a promise of a dinner out from his father; harmful, tormented interactions with schoolmates Zack, Brent, and Cory; and a request from a classmate that he take her to prom, in response to which he is both vulnerable and overcome with the desire to be accepted. He craves the appreciation of others. Once he's lost, he plots his revenge with care.

Once Edward leaves the forest, the novel rushes toward the execution of his dark plans. He finds out that the bullies who set out to kill him are now living comfortable lives, if as criminals who hurt and manipulate other people. His methods of effecting justice are more unpredictable, mirroring his sense of the unpredictability of life in general; Edward notes that he's shifted from nursing ambitions to go to medical school and date the girl of his dreams into fighting for survival and pursuing vigilante justice.

However, these compelling themes are obscured by distractions in the prose, including detailed, extravagant descriptions of luxury cars, homes, and yachts. The unrealistic comforts that Edward's bullies enjoy are given too much space in the text, and they ultimately undermine the convincing elements of both Edward's quest and his foes' villainy. More complementary are the descriptions of the stunning, terrifying mountains that prove crucial to Edward's evolution. At first a danger to his life, that setting becomes the reason that he remains alive years later. He overcomes physical pain and the desperation of hunger in an inspiring way, as when he learns how to fish. The thick forest is immersive and atmospheric—a novel highlight.

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ANNA MARIA COLIVICCHI (March 10, 2023)

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