

The Daddy Diaries

Joshua Braff

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Truths about the messiness of life give emotion to this novel of family, change, and growing pains.

Joshua Braff's breezy third novel, *The Daddy Diaries*, follows one family's growing pains as they navigate a move from San Francisco, California, to St. Petersburg, Florida.

Braff sets the novel into motion with a request. Jackie asks her husband, Jay—the colloquial, no-frills narrator—if they should try for another baby. Jay agrees, but secretly roils with the thought of more diapers and sleepless nights.

Jay and thirteen-year-old Alex share a love of Mexican Coke and Googling random curiosities, but Alex turns moody and distant. Ten-year-old Tara, on the other hand, is imaginative and amiable, and easily adjusts. As Jackie's business trips proliferate, Jay, once a copywriter, stays home with the kids and clings to his notebook, sketching out ideas for essays and novels as they come to him at pool parties and family get-togethers.

When Alex cuts class one day, Jay panics. As the pressure to be super-dad mounts, his own childhood demons come back to haunt him. He gets jealous of other men, pouts when his friends don't praise his writing, and sometimes fumes with anger. Jay never explains why he is mad, only drops clues about possibilities, which blurs his motivations.

The novel flails about for tension, ignoring the arcs already set into motion. Instead of confronting Alex or trying to reconnect, Jay gets sidetracked when Ray, his childhood pal, comes into town and stirs up trouble; seemingly out of nowhere, a mom from the kids' school puts the moves on Jay.

Missed opportunities and clunky sentences abound. In one scene, Jay calls a vasectomy hotline behind Jackie's back and asks that they send him a brochure, but it never shows up in the mail. On three different occasions, Jay takes a "huge sip" of wine.

While *The Daddy Diaries* is flawed, it moves rather quickly and captures a few truths: life is messy, and it doesn't always easily tidy up.

JOSH COOK (Summer 2015)

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