

The Fortress Walls Within: A Novel

Ken Jackson

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People who defeat life-threatening illnesses report feeling profound gratitude for their survival. This change in life view often opens their hearts to the humanity around them. The protagonist in Ken Jackson's *The Fortress Walls Within* experiences a similar awakening.

The novel begins slowly with the first chapter devoted to Robert Henry's inner anguish. A middle-aged man leading a "normal" life, he professes contentment, but his awkwardness around other people manifests in persistent irritation with coworkers and a marriage marked by surface calm and hurtful undercurrents. His wife and daughter seem devoted, but they fall short of giving him the attention he craves.

His habitual need to please spurs Robert to help a neighborhood boy, nine-year-old Andy Bell, who wants to build a tree fortress on property owned by old Mr. Johnson. Johnson agrees to let Andy use his land, even recommending an ideal tree near the property's edge. The book's title reflects a recurring theme comparing the fortress to people's habit of building self-protective psychological barriers. As they inspect the tree, Robert thinks, "I had a fleeting thought that helping Andy build his fortress was helping me tear down mine."

The narrative intimates that metaphysical forces influence events and personal interactions. Shortly after the construction project begins, Johnson appears with coffee and donuts for Robert and Andy. Having skipped breakfast and his requisite morning brew, Robert welcomes this act of kindness and says, "It was as though the old man somehow knew this."

When Robert begins to lose weight and feel unusually tired, the story's focus shifts from Andy's project to Robert's diagnosis and treatment for prostate cancer. Written in passive voice from Robert's perspective, the narrative loses impetus at this point. The author fails to bring out the nuanced feelings of his characters, describing only their superficial actions as they worry and wait for resolution. Robert's doctor assures him from the outset that the cancer is highly treatable and predicts full recovery. This makes the family's concern less credible and allows readers to predict the outcome. However, Robert's deepening friendship with Johnson is successfully portrayed as the older man offers his support to Robert, revealing that his wife died of cancer.

While Andy's story comes to life in charming fashion, showing his disruptive home life and an innocent determination to build his tree fortress, the author draws Andy as an idealized character who does not embody the awakening adult awareness of a typical nine-year-old boy. Chapter breaks smoothly separate point-of-view changes between Robert's first-person and Andy's limited third-person perspectives.

Confusion in the use of past and present tenses, frequently misplaced punctuation, and incorrect words mar the text. Robert's fondness for humor to mask his sense of inadequacy succeeds in some instances but not always.

While this quiet book has pronounced flaws, it will touch readers who enjoy a spiritual-allegory ending in a satisfactory, if predictable, conclusion.

MARGARET CULLISON (March 12, 2013)

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