ForeWord Reviews
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GENERAL

The Golden Handle
Josh Berman
AuthorHouse
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Three Stars (out of Five)

Josh Berman's bleak debut novel, *The Golden Handle*, follows embittered seventeen-year-old Wendy as she searches for "somewhere golden," a place with genuine love far away from her current harsh reality. Wendy's anger stems from her brutal rape by her father, Steve, on her sixth birthday. She still lives with him and her self-absorbed mother, Stella, whose attempts to reach out to her daughter result in shouting matches and tears. After a hellish seventeenth birthday, Wendy runs away from home. Dogged by memories of the rape, she finds herself caught in an anti-Semitic attack, an abduction, a fire, and murders. Bruised and battered, she flounders around for a week trying to catch the golden handle that will open a doorway to her contentment. Perhaps she will find joy with her beloved uncle from childhood, Steve's brother Jim.

Wendy, Stella, Steve, Jim, and Wendy's love interest Mike are vividly drawn. While the characters' predicaments evoke empathy, it is difficult to like them because they are depicted so negatively. Wendy elicits sympathy because she is a rape victim, but she brands Stella "an idiot" for not knowing things that Wendy has never bothered to tell her. When one suspects she has softened enough toward Stella to rescue her from an apartment fire, Wendy brains her mother with a fire extinguisher and tosses her unconscious body to safety. Stella, ignorant to her daughter's needs and generally depressed, is a tragic figure. Mike and Wendy bond over ranting about the decline of society. Jim ends up not being the savior Wendy thinks he is.

Berman's world is indeed as horrible as Mike and Wendy view it to be. Characters enjoy superlative moments of contentment only to have an over-the-top tragedy plunge them into the depths of despair. Wendy is constantly being knocked unconscious, people are untrustworthy, and conflict is often resolved through violence. In this wretched place, characters behave inconsistently. As the unfortunate events pile up, it strains credibility that the protagonist could go through so much in a week. Berman seems to delight in making his characters suffer. Grammatically, the author frequently uses words in the wrong context. This generally solid

debut is recommended for lovers of dystopian fiction.

Jill Allen