

The Hero Experience

Bruce Cook

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Ample humor and spot-on character descriptions create a fun read about the summer four high schoolers decide to become superheroes.

It's summer, in 1967, and Brad Jones ends his junior year of high school with nothing to do until September. Brad's a good kid, the only child of an aircraft mechanic and a housewife in an Atlanta suburb. He's clumsy around girls but has a few good buddies who share his love of superheroes—Batman, Superman, and Spiderman. Combine that with summer boredom, too little common sense, and overactive imaginations, and Brad's summer turns out to be one for the books after the guys decide to suit up and fight crime.

Readers get their money's worth with *The Hero Experience*, beginning with Bruce Cook's spot-on descriptions of a teenager's life in the era before cell phones, MTV, and social media. Cook does his best work with characters. Young Brad's a sympathetic protagonist, especially believable in interactions with teachers, friends, parents, and girls—and the parents of those girls. Cook does no less well with Brad's friends: Carl, the son of an airline pilot; Stan, who is all freckles and fun; and Doug, a morose, glass-half-empty type.

The quartet takes on crime fighting as a lark, donning superhero garb and appearing at crime scenes. With masks and bows-and-arrows, the name "The Bowmen" becomes a natural choice. Here again, especially in the initial stages, Cook's convincing. The pluck and luck involved are novel-worthy, and Cook's knowledge of his setting's time and place add veracity, but as the teens' crime-fighting adventures grow more intense and violent, character evolution is stretched to the edge of the creditable, and the escapades and escapes are less probable rather than entirely possible.

With its narrative restricted to two threads—summer fun and girls—the novel seems heavy on setup. Judicious pruning could trim a hundred pages. The problem isn't repetition but rather over-development. An example is an eight-page description of a schoolyard fight at the book's opening. It sets the scene and provides character insight, but it also unnecessarily increases the page count, as do other similar peripheral anecdotes.

The cover design is abstract and rather plain, given the action-filled story, and there are a few minor spelling errors and grammatical mistakes. There's ample, PG-rated humor, but in the early chapters, Cook indulges in funny one-liners on every page ("but it proved beyond all doubt that Clayton Denault had more balls than a pool table") delivered at a pace that makes them too distracting.

Cook has mastered the clumsiness of teenage romance. Brad is tongue-tied, self-conscious, and awkward with girls, but as he begins to date, Brad grows, learning that girls face social interaction with the same fragile egos as boys.

The Hero Experience offers a fun read for nostalgic baby boomers and is a relatable coming-of-age story for younger readers.

GARY PRESLEY (December 20, 2013)

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