

The Principal of the Thing

L. Pete Bishop

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Unknown (pp)

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In *The Principal of the Thing*, veteran educator L. Pete Bishop creates a “fictionalized memoir” that condenses his twenty years of experience within the US education system into a fast-paced, energetic one-year record of his time as principal at Central High—a metropolitan high school that has failed to pass state testing for over twenty years. Reminiscent of blockbuster films like *Lean On Me* and *Dangerous Minds*, this memoir is a stark representation of the deep-rooted problems urban school systems face. From ineffective grading systems to gun-toting teens and prostitution, Bishop creates a full-color portrait of the incredible challenges teachers and administrators struggle with in their day-to-day lives as educators.

Taking the form of a daily journal, this memoir speaks through the voice of Will Packer—a fictionalized version of the author himself—a no-nonsense, straight-talking educator who is determined to turn things around. The structure of the book allows the narrative to maintain a steady, upbeat rhythm. Like a diary, Will’s tone is casual and chatty as he gives readers a run-down of daily tasks and events. This down-to-earth tone injects the narrative with a strong sense of character; Will’s ruminations are both informative and entertaining, the narrative energetic. This casual attitude, however, extends into rather one-sided assessments of other characters, and the line between fiction and memoir is blurred into confusion. Will’s rash judgments of other administrators can be interpreted as a nuance in his character, however as a representation of Bishop’s own feelings, the tone is unsettling and superficial, suggesting a lack of introspection.

This lack of genuine internal reflection prevents the memoir from reaching its fullest potential. The narrative is chock full of dramatic moments that are fast paced and exciting—but Bishop rarely allows Will to pause for serious reflection, nor does he provide insight into his background. What drives Will to pummel his way through a broken system to educate disadvantaged teens? Going beyond the usual mantra of “doing it for the kids” would have resulted in an in-depth memoir with meaning.

Although it would have been easy to follow in the footsteps of a Hollywood urban-school drama and use its plentiful assortment of clichéd characters, Bishop provides readers with true to life characters who are both interesting and complex. His characterization of the school’s security officer, John Colpean, is particularly compelling. John’s intuitive ability to sense student disturbances—from underage drinking to full-fledged riots—paired with his slow deterioration from a rare illness provides the text with the necessary depth and nuance to gain the reader’s empathy and interest.

The Principal of the Thing is a powerful fictionalized memoir that will be an important read for educators and administrators of public education. Its subject matter and readability will also appeal to parents and everyday concerned citizens.

SHOILEE KHAN (February 7, 2011)

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