

The Way Up

Ward Jones

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Former lawyer Ward Jones has made good use of his private and corporate legal expertise in his fifth novel, *The Way Up*. Against a backdrop of courtrooms, lawsuits, and the legal maneuvering needed to create an oil and gas exploration company, Jones weaves an insightful story of a young man's climb to the pinnacle of his career.

Although he is a recent law school graduate, John Howard can barely hold down a job of any kind in Houston. Fired from a legal firm, he becomes a retail furniture salesman. He loses that job over an affair with an older woman, a relationship he is in while also courting the younger woman he eventually marries.

Before the marriage, John's life is a series of disasters—the loss of his older brother in a fatal car crash, ongoing abuse from his alcoholic father, the death of his beloved mother from cancer, and his inability to find his career niche. Then, by happenstance, John meets his future wife, a dedicated career lawyer, and shortly afterward an elderly benefactor and former oil tycoon who partners with him to found an oil and gas exploration and drilling company. But calamities strike again, and John's marriage ends in a divorce, with his infant daughter in his ex-wife's custody. There is sufficient hope left in John's life, however, for the author to have announced he is already writing a sequel.

Jones has a talent for both drama and comedy. Various scenes between John and his parents evoke the son's scorn for his father, leading John to admit to himself, "all that loathing had turned into something else. Desire. I wanted to kill him." About his love for his mother, John recalls the Christmas gift she gave him with "her once in a lifetime look of pure happiness." The scenes when she is dying of cancer are particularly poignant, especially when John arrives too late to bid her goodbye because of his father's miscommunication. Crying openly, John leaves the hospital with "emotions alternating between rage and sorrow, and ... embarrassment."

On the other hand, the description of John's meeting with his blue-collar, beer-swilling about-to-be in-laws is broad comedy at its best, with folks in a food fight "throwing hush puppies at each other, this while swearing four letter words."

While effectively pacing his narrative, Jones also delineates his characters in memorable ways—a father's anti-Semitism, a mother's tenderness, a wife's hard-heartedness, a brother-in-law's boorishness, a mother-in-law's religiosity, an unnamed benefactor's generosity. His characters transform over time as well. John, for instance, develops from an immature twenty-six-year-old who is bullied by his father into a sophisticated, confident businessman, sorely tested by environmental catastrophes and a beautiful wife who increasingly places her career far ahead of him and her child.

The Way Up is recommended as an enjoyable read for a general audience, though the novel's appeal is tempered by the author's propensity to use incomplete or awkward sentences. In one example, Jones writes, "Smelled now because I was close to the bathroom, the scent of urine." The text also contains a smattering of typos and an inaccurate reference to "a Diocletian sword" instead of "the sword of Damocles." Finally, it is questionable that Jones chooses not to identify John's benefactor by name but only as "the old man," "he," or "him" for the length of the book.

With more judicious editing, Jones's sequel could fulfill the potential demonstrated in *The Way Up*.

WAYNE CUNNINGHAM (May 16, 2013)

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