

The Winner Maker

Jeff Bond

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The Winner Maker is a cerebral thriller with slow pacing and a rewarding finish.

Jeff Bond's *The Winner Maker* is a genre-bending examination of the cult of winning, hero worship and false idols, and of the education complex's hidden heart of darkness.

Doctor Bob Fiske is not like other teachers. More a cult leader or a wise sage than an educator, his core group of student adherents is called the "Winners," and they include a cross-section of young scholars. There is a former all-star quarterback, Doug; a successful marketing genius, Stephanie; a programming geek, Eric; and brilliant but shy Lydia.

The Winners reunite ten years after their graduation following the accidental death of one of Fiske's pupils during a school presentation atop the Chrysler Building. Also bringing them together is Fiske's sudden disappearance. That Fiske is missing is equally huge and salacious: evidence suggests that the teacher ran away with a sixteen-year-old girl.

The mystery surrounding the death, and Fiske's disappearance, brings to the surface the trauma that each Winner shares. These achievement-chasers, it turns out, are plagued by personal demons, many of which return during their amateur investigation into Fiske's whereabouts and his true relationship with the underage girl.

Intelligent plot turns require consideration of what winning looks like, who is a winner, and who gets to decide this. The dual nature of personal influence and influential people is also pondered; Fiske and his cult of personality have both positive and negative elements.

At various times acting as a coming-of-age novel, a crime story, and a work of sociopolitical commentary, the novel is jumbled, with interesting plot points buried under awkward dialogue from characters who represent high school cliques more than anything else. Even when the characters go all in with their lies, deceit, and treachery, they read like badly behaved teenagers, not vile young adults.

The story is slow to begin and its middle chapters drag, but it cultivates suspense well. At first, the villain seems to be Bob Fiske, the not-so-perfect mentor who may or may not be a sexual predator. That notion, and Fiske's guilt, are called into question midway through the book.

The language is sometimes pretentious, particularly in the prologue, which does not add much to the story. An otherwise satisfying conclusion devotes its last few paragraphs to poetic rhapsodizing about the seasons and does not tie up every loose end.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (May 14, 2019)

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