



Wish

Jake Smith

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Smith weaves emotional tension into this spiritual story of leukemia and baseball.

A nine-year-old boy suffering from leukemia makes a selfless wish that challenges his father in Jake Smith's moving *Wish*. Their shared love of baseball adds depth to the father-son relationship.

Smith introduces his first work of fiction with the dramatic moment when James McConnell learns that his son, Aaron, first diagnosed with cancer at age five, is again critically ill. James and his wife, Emily, had dared to believe that Aaron's five months of complete remission would continue indefinitely. Instead, Aaron, his parents, and his six-year-old sister, Elizabeth, move into a family suite at a pediatric cancer research hospital in southern central Michigan, where he faces more aggressive treatment.

The family's emotional tension about Aaron's illness looms large in this story. When James and Emily meet with Aaron's new oncologist, Dr. Barna, to discuss his chances for recovery, the doctor tells them that finding a bone marrow donor match for the boy's rare tissue type is the best chance for his long-term survival. "Define long-term," Emily responds, wanting the most definitive prognosis the doctor can't give.

An effective use of analogy heightens the book's poignant message. For example, when Aaron begins to improve, the family attends a Detroit Tigers home game. James, who abandoned his dream of playing professional baseball to marry Emily, shares with Aaron the thrill of walking onto an major-league field before the game starts. A religious man, James describes the space as a "cathedral" and compares the middle of the field to a "sanctuary." Smith writes, "He felt so small, so insignificant, and everything around him seemed so ... holy."

Smith convincingly shows Emily and James's devotion to each other and their children. A revealing moment occurs just as the family prepares to leave the hospital after Aaron's treatment has ended. Concerned about Aaron's lack of enthusiasm for feeling better and going home, James reminds his son that he is a cancer survivor. His son replies, "No, Dad, that's just it. I'm not a survivor. I'm just ... surviving."

Smith's competent prose style and flawless editing reflect his professional experience as a magazine editor and author of nonfiction articles and books. A well-researched story, *Wish* offers an insightful look into the perils of childhood leukemia. While the focus on baseball may not interest some readers, this story of a family struggling to overcome their son's devastating illness holds universal appeal.

MARGARET CULLISON (Summer 2014)

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