



Without Jenny

Mark Gunther

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Without Jenny is a heart-wrenching depiction of a parent persisting after the loss of her child.

Mark Gunther's devastating novel *Without Jenny* traverses five years of a mother's grieving, gracefully portraying a family's recovery from tragedy to illuminate various aspects of living with loss.

Joy parks her car near a construction site on the way to buy her daughter, Jenny, a new pair of shoes, intending to leave the girl alone in the car for only a moment. It is enough time for the scaffolding at the site to collapse, killing Jenny instantly. Joy, her husband Danny, and their six-year-old son Jake are left to scavenge the remains of their previously happy life.

From clearing out Jenny's bedroom to attempting a group therapy session, each step of the grieving and coping process is conveyed realistically and elegantly through Joy's point of view. As a character, she is not defined by the loss of her daughter; rather, she is a full human being whose purpose in the story is not only to show a parent's grief but also to reveal how an individual might navigate tragedy in the context of the life that they must continue living.

The book is smoothly paced until about halfway through, when it fast-forwards through a full year. Jake turns seven in one chapter and then celebrates his eighth birthday only a handful of pages later. Danny and Jake both convey their thoughts and emotions about how Joy is coping over the course of the book, placing her concretely in her domestic situation while simultaneously portraying the difficulties of sustaining a family life and household after a heartbreaking loss. Both Danny's and Jake's coping strategies—Danny throwing himself into his work and Jake expressing a desire to play Jenny's old games or read her favorite books—offer additional perspectives on the loss and provide conflict in both the book's plot and Joy's own grieving process. Joy is periodically reminded by her friends and family members that she is not the only one dealing with devastation—and she's not the only one who doesn't quite know how to manage it.

With a writing style that is as clear-minded and straightforward as it is absorbing, *Without Jenny* pulls the reader in to family's great depths of emotion. Those who have suffered a similar loss may find it hard to read—or may find it extraordinarily helpful. *Without Jenny* is a heart-wrenching depiction of a parent persisting after the loss of her child.

AIMEE JODOIN (August 20, 2018)

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