

Word Nerd

Susin Nielsen

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Families come in all shapes and sizes. Society no longer insists on the traditional, two-parent model, but often luck still favors those families with more than one adult. Ambrose has a slight disadvantage: his dad died before Ambrose was born. Also, he wears purple corduroys, he has a deadly peanut allergy, and he can't quit blurting out questions, truths, and biting observations, even when sense tells him to keep his mouth shut.

But Ambrose and his mom do their best to help each other through what is often a lonely, tense, existence. Because Irene can't get a full time job at any of the universities at which she lectures, they move around a lot to various apartments and schools, none of which seem to appreciate Ambrose for the smart, talented kid he is.

Vancouver seems like it will be the same old story, until Ambrose nearly dies as a result of a bullying prank at school. So Ambrose studies at home via a correspondence course, and his mother switches to lecturing during the evenings so she can teach him during the day. Which leaves Ambrose free to get into mischief while she's away at class.

As it happens, Ambrose is the kind of boy who finds sneaking off to a Scrabble club to be the ultimate thrill, especially when his companion is the ex-con son of the landlord. There, among letter tiles and dictionaries, he finds the extended family he's been missing his whole life.

Susin Nielsen, a script writer for the TV show [title=tv]Degrassi High[/title] and author of several books for children, handles the relationship between Ambrose and his mom with the perfect touch. Their love and dependency on each other is painfully complicated and yet oddly beautiful. Yes, we know Irene is uptight and way too protective, but her sense of crushing responsibility transcends her obvious faults. Mom is recognizable without being over the top.

Likewise, Cosmo Economopoulos, Ambrose's new friend recently back from jail, is not your typical young drugged-out crook. The huge effort it takes to change his life is evident; readers are sweetly aware that his attachment to Ambrose is as much for his own sake as for Ambrose's.

Nielsen lets her characters show their genuine selves with language that is lucid, economical, and, especially during the Scrabble games, extremely fun. Readers both young and old will find much entertainment, and some great two-letter words, in *Word Nerd*.

ANDI DIEHN (May / June 2010)

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