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Clarion Review ★★★★☆ JUVENILE FICTION

You Gotta Have Heart

Bruce Bernstein
Outsider Press (Jul 1, 2018)
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You Gotta Have Heart *is a beautiful story, both sad and hopeful.*

Bruce Bernstein's emotional *You Gotta Have Heart* follows a young boy who lives in a group home as he searches out his place in the world—and people he can share it with.

Alan is an orphan. His parents died in a car accident when he was just nine years old. He's now twelve, and though life has thus far been hard for him, he is hopeful about his future. His aunt has promised to adopt him soon, and he's looking forward to living with her and his cousins. He has also just begun to take karate lessons, about which he is very excited.

Skillfully developed, the story is both believable and unpredictable. As Alan works hard to learn karate, he is encouraged by the advanced students and by his sensei to always put forth his best effort, even when he does not know for certain that he can succeed. As he faces several intensely difficult challenges, this idea helps Alan cope. Ultimately, it proves to be a lesson that he will carry with him for the rest of his life, and its power comes through on every page.

Supporting characters are an interesting mix, including Dale, a lawyer who is studying for his black belt; Mr. Morris, a black belt from the dojo; and Frankie, a vicious bully who terrorizes Alan and his roommate, Chris. Each helps the story unfold, but none of them are independently developed. The book indicates their closeness to Alan, but those relationships never come to clear emotional fruition. This is particularly true in Dale's case; though the two become very close, it is unclear why he and Alan move from a negative first meeting into a fast friendship.

Writing is uneven throughout the book. Dialogue flows naturally, and the plot is nicely developed, with all of the major plot points interwoven seamlessly and tied up satisfactorily by the end of the book. However, awkward instances of overly directed narration redirect focus to the structure of the writing and away from the content of the story.

The lessons that Alan learns are often painful, but he uses them to create a good life for himself. The book ends on a thoroughly satisfying note that demonstrates Alan's growth. *You Gotta Have Heart* is a beautiful story, both sad and hopeful.

CATHERINE THURESON (July 10, 2018)

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