
“Really? Could you help a guy out once in a while? If I’m not a lost cause right now, who is?” That’s Gabe asking the statue of St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, for help with his numerous dilemmas: one of his best friends, Maya, now hates him because he usurped her as the smartest kid in their grade; his dad wants a jock for a son and picks a cousin for his basketball team instead of Gabe; his sister hates him and makes him feel like a dorky shrimp; and, oh yeah, Gabe gets gassy when he’s nervous and he gets nervous every time he’s around his dream girl, Becka. And, don’t even get him started on his locker.

In Gabe, first-time North Carolina novelist Marilee Haynes offers up a rare juvenile literary character—a male protagonist who deals with the type of emotional conflicts mainly addressed in juvenile fiction written for girls. Instead of facing down magical creatures in a fantastical land, Gabe battles his self-doubt and insecurity in his Catholic middle school in North Carolina. Tweens will identify with Gabe’s bewilderment at how to navigate new perspectives on family, friends, romantic love, and the world in general.

Gabe’s teacher tells the class that “Robert Frost said that poetry is the result of feelings finding thoughts, and thoughts expressing themselves in words.” Making those connections between physical sensations, the emotions that cause those physical sensations, and discussing those feelings is new territory for tweens, and Gabe. Kids will identify with Gabe when his “stomach clenches,” when his ears “feel like they’re on fire,” when “hearing my mom say the word puberty was excruciating,” and when he pushes his feelings back down “somewhere near my liver.” Haynes is good at connecting the physical sensations that bombard tweens (“the top of my head starts tingling, and my stomach goes queasy”) back to their emotional causes, and then allowing the reader to see the light, or hope, at the end of the tunnel. Tween readers may agree with Gabe when he sees his middle school days as “so far, so weird.” But they will also come away with a sense of community in their suffering and be able to identify the causes of these visceral onslaughts, armed with the vocabulary to talk about them.

The religious references are very subtle considering the Catholic publisher; however those references make this title more suitable for a public library rather than school library collection. Although the protagonist is in seventh grade and the book is marketed as a young adult book, the lack of any sexual references and the violence being limited to a couple punches would allow this title to fit nicely into a juvenile fiction collection.

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