

Falling from Heights

Chris F. Needham

Now or Never (2007)

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Reviewed by Mary Simmons for Reader Views (6/07)

Told through a series of letters and postings written by two people separated by more than 30 years, "Falling from Heights," by Chris F. Needham is an exploration into familial relations and the human psyche.

The novel begins in June 2002 when aspiring writer Jeremy Jacks receives news that his father and brother are in trouble. Although he hasn't been back to the West Coast in two years, he books a flight from Toronto and runs headlong into the chaotic family drama from which he thought he had escaped.

The next scene is in the form of a letter from Birdie Cormack to her parents written in June 1972 while she is participating in a government-sponsored drug experiment.

The voices shift between these two times and events throughout the rest of the novel, comparing, contrasting and linking the lives of the characters and gradually unfolding a plot full of twists and turns and more than one shocking revelation.

Needham has taken a rather obscure piece of Canadian history – the LeDain Commission on Drugs – and has highlighted one of its experiments through the letters of a participant. Birdie's voice is at times witty, sarcastic, pained and amused. There are letters in which she is obviously under the influence of the cannabis she is forced to smoke and others in which she sounds sober and focused. There is also a contrast between the tones she takes when writing to her parents as opposed to the looser language she uses with her sister. The changes show an interesting family dynamic, but are also an aspect of the experiment since the letters to her parents are also written for the purpose of selling back to the conductors of the experiment as a diary of her time spent there.

The non-private chronicling aspect of the letters leads to a rather vague style in many cases that generates a need to read between the lines. This is a book where the explicit writings are sometimes less important than what has been left off the page. Needham uses a lot of inference and innuendo, which can be off-putting for someone looking for a light read. In order to enjoy this book, you need to be willing to dive beyond the surface and explore the murky depths with the characters.

There are a lot of dark undertones to this story, which has characters with violent tendencies who often use coarse language and engage in mature subject matter. While I was not offended by these aspects of the writing, I can recognize that it may limit its readership.

Overall, "Falling from Heights" brings up fascinating aspects of humanity, sparking conversation and possible debate. The characters are flawed pieces of a larger family puzzle that gets put together as you read. Sometimes the picture seems distorted and the pieces don't seem to fit, but by the end of the book it is almost complete. After all, puzzles are seldom perfect; we always lose an edge piece or two.