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## Children's Books

By GABRIELLE ZEVIN

### **THE ONE WHERE THE KID NEARLY JUMPS TO HIS DEATH AND LANDS IN CALIFORNIA**

By Mary Hershey.

275 pp. Razorbill/Penguin Young Readers Group. \$15.99. (Ages 10 and up)

Thirteen-year-old boys are mysteries. By and large, they don't keep diaries and no, they don't want to talk about it, thank you very much. According to booksellers and parents I've met, they don't read books either, but this may be just a nasty rumor.

"The One Where the Kid Nearly Jumps to His Death and Lands in California," by Mary Hershey, has a title that works as a pretty nifty plot summary, too: Alastair, a 13-year-old amputee who calls himself Stump, spends the summer with his estranged father in California. Five years before the start of the story, Stump's leg was amputated following a premature jump from a ski lift. The mystery here, of course, is why did he do it? And why does he hate his father so much? And oh yes, why has his father up and married a double leg amputee? If you've ever read a coming-of-age novel, you can probably imagine how these stories resolve themselves, and that's not a criticism so much as a function of the genre: kid moves from inexperience to experience, kid achieves personal growth, etc.

There is much to admire, though. For one, there aren't easy villains. With Stump's parents, Hershey takes what appear to be types — the absentee father, the evil stepmother — and gradually reveals them to be characters of nuance and satisfying complexity. The author also has a convincing, lively "boy" voice and even better, a sense of humor. After Stump has met and argued with his stepmother for the first time, his father comments, "I don't want to see you and Sky get off on the wrong foot together." Of course, the joke here is that Stump and Skyla have only one foot between them.

In the end, this is a book about manhood, from the point of view of a boy on the cusp of it; I particularly liked how the author handled Stump's increasing awareness and pride in his physical self. But the novel is also about fathers and sons, and the difficult task of being either.

One of the most incisive moments comes when Stump and his father truly see each other as men for the first time: “There was Dad ... looking at me. Me looking at him. Both of us looking at each other — well, different-like.”

Let’s return for a second to that jump. It turns out to be a metaphorical one, too — in good books, when is a jump ever just a jump? In this case, it’s about the tendency of young people to jump to conclusions without necessarily having all the facts, and it’s a fine metaphor for all that transpires here between father and son.

Still, “The One Where the Kid Nearly Jumps to His Death and Lands in California” is one of those books that’s probably easy to miss. The title is long and unwieldy. The plot is, too. The book would not have suffered from being shaved a subplot or two: a teenage soap star in a celebrity race! An alcoholic mother on a somewhat sapphic retreat! A Mr. Miyagi-like coach with unresolved father-son issues of his own! But for me, all this was beside the point. The real attraction here is the boy and his voice. h

*Gabrielle Zevin is the author of “Elsewhere.” Her next novel, “Memoirs of a Teenage Amnesiac,” will be published in September.*

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