



Here in the Real World

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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Children's literature in the United States has a fine tradition of looking at the teenager as a social misfit, of acknowledging individuals who decide to go their own way; and of celebrating the contribution that such kids can make to the larger society. Sara Pennypacker's latest book is about this and much more. The title is a reference to the two ways of looking at the world shown by its lonely protagonists. There is Ware, a thoughtful and often anxious boy, who worries that seeing things differently and sometimes enjoying his solitude may mean that he never fits in. And there is Jolene, a girl whose answer to life's battering is self-reliance and low expectations of the world around her. They come together while spending the summer transforming the vacant lot left by the demolition of a local church. In the course of the novel, their differences prove complementary. Ware's dreaming is spurred into action by Jolene's determination to survive; and Ware's thoughtfulness and enthusiasm supports and encourages Jolene. Yet, until the very end of the novel, they argue about the nature of reality: not in any philosophical sense but about what you can expect of other people and of life. For Jolene, Ware lives in the magical fantasy land inside his head and she constantly meets his ambitious plans for the lot with the injunction to live in the real world. The novel itself weaves cleverly between the polar ends of the argument but its ending, not unexpectedly, and in tune with that notion of perfectibility that runs through American thought, comes down firmly on the side of the transforming possibilities of idealism. That said, it is all put together so well and within the understanding of a younger teenage reader. Ware and Jolene are convincing and endearing characters, each in their own way; and readers will be rooting for them both well before the wished-for, and genuinely moving, climax.

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