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BOOK REVIEW

The Book of Joshua: A Novel by Jennifer Anne Moses, University of Wisconsin Press, 2018

KIA JANE RICHMOND

Jennifer Anne Moses's (2018) young adult novel, *The Book of Joshua: A Novel*, begins with a letter from eighteen-year-old protagonist Joshua Cushing; he is writing in response to a college admissions essay prompt about overcoming a challenge or experience that shaped his life. For Josh, that experience began with his awakening in a New Jersey psychiatric hospital; he was missing his left eye and his girlfriend, Sophie, and could not remember losing either one. Moses's book unravels the mystery for the reader, explaining how Josh lost his left eye, what happened to Sophie, and how mental illness fits into the mix. Readers learn a great deal about how Josh's schizophrenia affects his daily life as well as the lives of his parents and his younger brother Nate, and his friends and classmates.

In an interview with Kathryn Zox, author Jennifer Anne Moses shares that her inspiration for the book and for the character of Joshua Cushing was based in part on her own experiences with a former high school beau who developed a fascination with her in college, even stalking her at one point. That boyfriend ended up leaving college after having hallucinations and a schizophrenic break, eventually taking out his own eye as part of a delusional experience. *The Book of Joshua*, however, is a work of fiction, one that takes readers on a journey between Josh's current life as a high school senior and flashes of memories from his junior year when he began dating Sophie, who is now mysteriously absent from the picture like his left eye, which is a "sewed-up socket, like an asshole, wrinkled and pink and ugly, where [his] eye used to be" (Moses, p. 32).

Before his "schizophrenic break," Josh, ran cross-country track, something at which his younger brother Nate has now begun to excel (Moses, p. 18). Josh, however, is repeating his senior year after spending time in a mental

hospital. Upon release from the "nuthouse," which is what he calls the hospital (Moses, p. 65), and after spending a few weeks in a "post-psych-ward transitional housing program," Josh is required to attend meetings of the "Teens in Transition Support System (or TITSS, a ridiculously hilarious acronym that apparently never occurred to the various MDs and PhDs who came up with it)" (Moses, p. 7). Josh participates in group therapy meetings at TITSS, which he says are based in part on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. At those meetings are a host of teens who include "teen fatsos, cutters, slashers, bulimics, anorexics, delusionals, OCDs, and failed suicidal chain-smokers" (Moses, p. 13).

During group therapy at TITSS, Josh recognizes one young woman, Susan. Though they had never spoken at the residential facility, at TITSS Susan chooses to target Josh with verbal bullying: she refers to him as "that thing" (Moses, p. 11) and "Satan" (Moses, p. 24); accuses him of staring at her and wanting to be her boyfriend; and screams to TITSS members, "He's fooling all of you. He thinks he has MAGIC POWERS. He's dangerous" (Moses, p. 37). Susan also engages in cyber-bullying through text messages that call him "Loser" and "Lard butt" (Moses, p. 71, 72). Josh is also bullied at school by a group of freshman that he calls "insects" because they "frantically" buzz around him in the halls (Moses, p. 28). These high school bullies physically intimidate Josh, circling him and trying to "corral [him] against the lockers (Moses, p. 29). They also make fun of him by singing a song about his losing an eye and losing his mind.

The person who helps Josh deal with the insects is Elizabeth, a new classmate. He refers to her at first as "Mouse-girl" because she is a "skinny brown-haired girl

of the daintily miniscule variety -- mouselike bones, mouselike facial expressions – the type I could crush to death simply by sneezing” (Moses, p. 21). Elizabeth’s friendship with Josh develops throughout the novel, and readers learn her secrets as well: how she got the scar on her face and why she generally keeps to herself at school and at home.

The other person who attempts to help Josh is Dr. Rose, his “personal, go-and-talk-to-psychiatrist” as opposed to the doctors in the hospital or residential treatment program (Moses, p. 8).

However, despite engaging in individual therapy with Dr. Rose, participating in TITSS, and being treated with drugs such as “Clozaril, Abilify, Ativan, [and] Luvox” in “varying combinations of doses” (Moses, p. 13), Josh carries on conversations with his stuffed dog, Athens, throughout the novel and continues to hear voices: “Not voices voices. I mean, I have them too, but I know that they’re coming from inside my mind. Sometimes they can be kind of loud though” (Moses, 36). In their sessions, Dr. Rose assures Josh that he is “getting better” and that “all of this, including the misery, is part of the healing process” (Moses 118).

The issue of drug use – not “Haldol, Prolixin, Navane, Loxapine, Stelazine, Trilafon, Mellaril, Ritalin, Methylin, Metadate, Concerta, Wellbutrin, Tenex, Clonidine, etcetera, but about drug drugs, the kind you take for fun” (Moses, p. 76) – is one that author Moses includes at multiple points in the novel. Readers learn that Josh has a history of smoking pot that predates his schizophrenic break: he was “once upon a time, quite the partaker of the mighty weed” (Moses, p. 13). Josh and a cross-country track teammate frequently smoke pot after practice, “and then just laugh and laugh” (Moses, p. 77). However, something changes for Josh. He states,

And then I started to get high and cry. Then I’d get high and everyone, including me, looked like a creature from outer space, and then I started hearing voices. I don’t remember when I personally became disconnected with normative reality, but that other part – how the voices became Voices, which told me that I had been chosen for great things – that part I do remember.” (Moses, p. 77-78)

It was after smoking “hash” with a friend that Josh “freaked out, scared out of my mind, until, voila, this angel came up to me, personally, to have a chat” (Moses, p. 78). Josh was terrified to talk to his parents about the

event; therefore, he took a cold shower. He notes, “By the time I had toweled off, the weed was wearing off. I was tired” (Moses, p. 78). It is not clear whether Josh continued to smoke marijuana after developing symptoms of schizophrenia, but he explains early in the novel that he no longer uses cannabis.

Researchers such as Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute for Drug Abuse at the National Institutes for Health, note that connections between marijuana use and schizophrenia are not clear. Volkow states that though drugs can cause a person to have symptoms such as “paranoia, hostility and disorganized thinking” and even a “psychotic episode”; that is “very different from a chronic, persistent psychotic disorder like schizophrenia” (as cited in Chen, 2015, para. 3).

In a 2017 report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, researchers purport “substantial evidence of a statistical association between cannabis use and the development of schizophrenia or other psychoses, with the highest risk among the most frequent users” (p. 295). Other researchers (e.g., Kelley et al., 2016; Bagot, Milin, & Kaminer, 2015) have also identified connections between early initiation of cannabis use and risk of early onset psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia.

Josh’s use of tobacco and cannabis are similar to that of Miles Cole, the main character in Nic Sheff’s 2014 young adult novel, *Schizo*. In that novel, Miles, experiences visual and auditory hallucinations after smoking pot with some older teenagers at the beach. (For a more extensive analysis of *Schizo*, see *Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature* by Kia Jane Richmond, 2019). Though Jennifer Anne Moses does not specifically draw conclusions about Josh’s marijuana use and his schizophrenic break, teachers using *The Book of Joshua* might introduce students to the issue and perhaps incorporate a research project on that issue along with lessons of a literary nature.

The Book of Joshua offers readers an excellent example of one young adult’s experiences with schizophrenia. Moses includes authentic descriptions of Josh’s symptoms of schizophrenia including hallucinations, disorganized thinking, and negative symptoms such as a lack of motivation or diminished affective expression (APA, 2013, p. 99). Likewise, the novel introduces readers to accurate treatment options (e.g., individual psychotherapy, group therapy, pharmacotherapy). The language used by Josh, his family, his classmates, his physicians, and others includes

both stereotypical terms such as “chainsaw massacre psychopath,” “bonkers,” “flat-out crazy nuts loony psycho,” and “planet fruitcake” (Moses, p. 28, 45, 32, 54) and authentic terminology such as “chemical brain function challenges” and “decompression exercises” (p. 11, 30).

Teachers and librarians invested in providing youth with realistic and engaging texts about mental illness should add *The Book of Joshua: A Novel* by Jennifer Anne Moses to their collections. The book will certainly help readers to develop a better understanding of how schizophrenia can alter the lives of those diagnosed with it as well as the lives of friends, family, and other community members.

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