



Guilt Trip

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Book

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Guilt Trip is about a chapter of accidents. As a morality tale and thriller set in a convincing teenage world, it is a gripping and disturbing narrative. It shows how a good deed can have terrible unintended consequences, how small thoughtless actions can bring unforeseen disasters, how a single wrong decision can blight several lives, how behaviour driven by sheer impulse and panic can in retrospect seem criminal and unforgivable.

The fatal events take place when Ali, Jackson and Hannah are in Year Eleven, and finally catch up with them two years later, when Ali in Year Thirteen is about to take 'A' levels and go on to Cambridge. The story is divided between these two times. The younger Ali has a boyfriend, Stephen, several years older. Stephen has a violent past and a scarred face to prove it, but at 19 or 20 seems a reformed character whose main interest is his car. Jackson's interest in Stephen's car leads to the formation of an accidental foursome. Out together one night, by pure chance they discover and stop the attempted suicide of Daniel Feeny, also in the Year Eleven school class, a good deed that brings all of them high praise. As Ali ponders two years later, 'To save Daniel's life. It was the most astonishing thing. So why, five weeks later, after trying to be his friend, after trying to help him, did they end up killing him?'

The short-lived fickle intensities of teenage emotions and relationships largely account for why, but their terrible results hinge on quite minor actions, small things and then large things done in the heat of the moment, that leave two of the three responsible (Hannah being by now outside the loop and another accidental victim) with tormented consciences that finally bring guilty secrets out into the open.

If you can fully believe in the characters, this is a compelling and sobering read. But here there are some difficulties, especially with the two males. Stephen, older than the others, may have reformed into a harmless car-lover, but with his violent past would he really have landed a grey-suited job with a building society? Moreover, there are several indications that Stephen is gay, but these are left as hints and puzzles, as if they are unfinished business from an earlier draft. Jackson is also a problem. He is a nice lad with a tendency (tragic as it proves) to eruptions of aggressive anger. Well and good, but is he the sort who would set such store by 'respect', that now traduced word which so appeals to those who least deserve it? As for Ali, the gifted, self-centred, conscience-stricken student from whose point of view the story is told, does she really deserve so much authorial indulgence, especially at the end? There are fault-lines here, but this is thematically a very serious novel as well as a readable one. So it begs a serious question. If these near-adults

deserve our understanding for their random criminal misadventures, what price the not dissimilar ones of real-life damaged ten-year-olds?

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