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A Friend At Midnight



Synopsis

Lily has settled into life in Connecticut after her parent's divorce but it's been harder on her eight-year-old brother Michael. After their mother remarries, her brother chooses to go live with his father in Washington, D.C., until the day he calls home from the Baltimore-Washington Airport where his father has abandoned him. Lily is home babysitting her baby stepbrother when she answers the phone. She has no idea the extent to which her faith in God will be tested. There is no choice for Lily. She will rescue Michael, but will she be able to rescue herself from the bitterness and anger she feels?

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Customer Reviews

Grade 6-8—In this novel's gripping first scene, eight-year-old Michael Rosetti is abandoned by his father at the Baltimore airport, his hopes of living with his dad after his mother's remarriage dashed by the man's self-centeredness and irresponsibility. Placing a collect call to his 15-year-old sister, Lily, Michael waits until she and their baby half brother fly from New York City to get him and return before their mother and stepfather get back from taking their older sister, Reb, to college. Michael swears Lily to secrecy, and Cooney uses this implausible scenario to tell the story of the teenager's growing fury at her father's callousness and its personality-changing effect on her brother. Throughout the book, Lily grapples with her difficulty in reconciling the Christian beliefs and ethics she learns at church and her inability to forgive her father. When Reb returns from college and announces her impending marriage, planning to have her father walk her down the aisle, the

story of his cruelty to Michael finally comes out. It is their quiet, forbearing stepfather who comes up with a way to avoid a confrontation between Lily and her father while preserving Reb's and Michael's loyalty to him, however misguided. Despite many flaws, the story is engrossing and the resolution satisfying. Cooney is somewhat heavy-handed in her criticism of school-system counseling, but she manages to avoid religious platitudes, grounding the story in a teenager's conflict with applying her beliefs to a difficult family reality.

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Readers who seek out Cooney's novels for their clever, suspenseful scenarios--as in *The Face on the Milk Carton* (1990) and its sequels--may be surprised to find that, in her latest, the expected thrills move into an exploration of Christian forgiveness. The book's first section plunges readers into the action: an 8-year-old is abandoned at an airport by his self-absorbed, negligent father, and his 15-year-old sister, Lily, makes a secret airplane journey to retrieve him. The toll that her father's cruelty takes on Lily unfolds in the book's two remaining sections, in which Cooney writes movingly about the dynamics of divorce, the hate that "occupied [Lily] like an army," and the sense of cosmic resentment that shakes her relationship with God. Though the psychological and spiritual themes may lose some readers, the promise of a resolution to Lily's anguish will pull at readers (non-Christians included) to the end, where meaty questions about God's obligation to believers, and vice versa, make the book a natural choice for youth ministers to share with teens.

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Loved this book. Young adult readers will enjoy these characters, and many will be able to relate to the plot. This is a must read.

Fifteen-year-old Lily Rosetti has had many ups and downs in the past few years: her parents' divorce, her mother remarrying, and then the arrival of her little brother Nathaniel. While these events would be difficult for anyone to adjust to, Lily has learned to cope and has settled comfortably into a new routine with her blended family. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for her younger brother Michael, who feels left out and has to share a room with the noisy, messy Nathaniel. Then, much to his family's dismay, Michael decides he wants to go live with his father.

Given his determination, Lily's family has no choice but to let the eight-year-old go. Two weeks later, Lily receives a phone call from Michael, who has been abandoned by his father and left at the Baltimore-Washington Airport with no means of returning home. Since she is taking care of Nathaniel while her family helps her older sister Rebecca move into her college dorm, Lily is forced to secretly buy a ticket and, along with Nathaniel, take a four-hour flight that will bring her to her frightened younger brother. Reluctantly, on Michael's insistence (and later to try to shield her brother from being a target of unfair scrutiny), Lily decides not to tell the rest of the family yet about the real reason for Michael's surprise return nor the events leading up to the abrupt abandonment. However, keeping such an important secret will not be easy, and Lily is thrown onto an emotional rollercoaster that will test her religious faith. *A FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT* presents Lily's and Michael's, and sometimes Nathaniel's, emotions quite well. However, there were a couple of things that bothered me about the story: the stepfather seems to show more genuine concern about Michael's return and his well-being than his mother and Rebecca do, and there is a significant time lapse in the story before there appears to be any type of real resolution to the family's crisis. I think if those two aspects had been explored further, the book would have been more compelling throughout rather than just in the beginning chapters. Nevertheless, *A FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT* is never boring and is worth checking out. It takes a somewhat realistic look at how the repercussions --- both good and bad --- of a life-changing event (or in this case, multiple life-changing events) can affect a family. ---
Reviewed by Sarah Sawtelle (SdarksideG@aol.com)

Lily is taking care of her baby brother Nathaniel while her mother and stepfather drive her older sister to college. Then the phone rings and she hears her eight year old brother Michael's voice. Despite their misgivings, her family had honored Michael's decision to go live with his father but now he is at Washington/Baltimore airport, alone and scared. No problem, Lily thinks, I can get the bus to LaGuardia to meet his plane. Only, Michael doesn't have a ticket to fly home. When Lily learns the truth about her brother's predicament she has to act quickly to rescue him. The fallout from that day turns Lily's world inside out and upsets her relationship with her family, her friends and with God. Cooney can build tension in a story like no one else. Lily's anger is justified and the reader shares it. She is trying to protect her brother and she is furious with her dad. How God can allow bad things to happen? "...She was skeptical of prayer, never paid attention at church and referred to the minister -- Dr. Bordon -- as Dr. Boring. But into the quiet air of her bedroom, she said, "God?" He wasn't listening. Lily could tell. She spoke more sharply. "God, Michael needs this. Make it happen. Don't give me that stuff about free will, how people make their own choices, how your choices don't

always intersect with the choices of others in a pleasing fashion and how responsibility lies with the individual. Get down here and make this happen."I heard Cooney talk about this book at a library conference. She commented (I paraphrase here) that there is an unspoken rule in mainstream YA publishing that you do not write about religion or faith. She is very active in her own church, has been all her life, and knowing that there are teens who are similarly involved, decided it was worth exploring as a YA novel. She was pleased when she learned the book was going to be released through two Random House divisions, WaterBrook(religious) AND Delacourt.The storytelling is compelling and stands on its own as a teen-in-crisis novel. Lily is searching for answers. Her questions about God and faith are ones many share. Cooney deftly explores the idea that faith does not guarantee "happily ever after" but helps believers and searchers deal with "what comes after."

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