

The Meaning of Maggie

Megan Jean Sovern

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In Megan Jean Sovern's novel, *The Meaning of Maggie*, readers are brought into the complex world of 11 year old Maggie Mayfield, the main protagonist. Maggie is an intellectual young lady with big aspirations, such as becoming the future president of the United States of America. She proudly walks around with titles such as " Student of the Month" and "5th grade Science Fair Champion" weighing on her shoulders. She displays a heavy contrast with her sisters, Layla and Tiffany ,who are obsessed with two things- physical appearance and boys. As different as they may be, however, the sisters have a commonality that brings them all together- a genuine desire to help their cool, Neil Young loving father who has Multiple Sclerosis.

Sixth grade is one of the most revolutionary years for Ms. Mayfield. She is starting at a new school (which she aims to have perfect attendance at) and tastes the first ounce of love when she meets Clyde, a boy in her class. As large of a focus as Maggie's academic career is to her, she has more on her mind than just grades. Because of his worsening condition, Maggie's father is forced to quit his job. As a result, Maggie's mother begins to work at a hotel, leaving her father with the girls a majority of the time. In the Mayfield house, there is one motto that is followed above all- pull your bootstraps up. As she goes through many trials, Maggie must remember to pull up her bootstraps, or be brave and courageous during difficult times.

One of the most unique aspects of *The Meaning of Maggie* is how the cultural context of the setting is incorporated in the story. It is safe to say that Maggie's parents were typical hippies in their younger years, and still are at heart. Although one downside to the novel is that the year and location the story takes place in is never mentioned, one could assume based on context clues that the plot takes form in the 1980's. Maggie's parents love talking about stories from their youth. They embark on trips across the country, love rock n' roll music, and tell Maggie they will tell her certain stories when she grows up because she is too young to hear. These characteristics were typical of the counterculture developing in the 1950-'s 1960's in the United States. Although not all kids will realize this ode to history, it adds a special touch to the novel.

I believe it was a brilliant idea for the novel to take the form as a memoir by Maggie. The addition of the prologue wonderfully sets readers up for the events that are discussed. Unlike some novels, the prologue is actually revisited towards the end of the novel, with the storyline coming full circle. In addition, the footnotes Maggie writes add both a comical and personal touch to the novel. As opposed to some novels in which readers are upset about the unresolved story, the cliffhanger is just right in this book. Readers do not know the fate of Mr. Mayfield. Yes, we know that he wakes up from the seizure but we never actually see him leave the hospital. As Maggie is researching for her science fair project, she finds out that her dad's illness, Multiple Sclerosis, has no known cure. The fact that readers don't truly know what

happens to Maggie's father makes the story more realistic. The truth is, many people don't get that happily ever after so many stories end with when dealing with a disease. It is a painful, tough journey that requires a tug on the bootstraps, as the Mayfields would say.

Although a highly enjoyable novel, there are a few shortcomings. Personally, I feel that Maggie was overly naive at times. Although she thinks she is very mature, she often acts the opposite of this. By 6th grade, there is a certain maturity a child should have. Maggie seems to lack the ability to see the bigger picture and understand others at times. Yes, the quirky protagonist cliché can be a nice way to go, but not to the point where the character is too much of an outsider. For instance, simply giving Maggie a best friend would have made her character so much more relatable as opposed to crafting her as this school obsessed lone wolf. Although a very relatable novel for those who have cared for relatives battling disease, I could definitely see those who have not gone through this having difficulty relating to this piece.

I would recommend this novel to readers of 10-13 years of age. I would say this is a book that can be picked up at the local library.

Recommended Titles:

Out of My Mind by Sharon M. Draper

Wonder by R.J. Palacio

Rules by Cynthia Lord.