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LENS 1

Reader-Response: *King of Shadows*

If I read Susan Cooper’s *King of Shadows* when I was a young adult, my response would have been overwhelmingly positive. Although an important emotional theme of this novel might not relate to a large percentage of young adults, the ones it does reach might just need that connection the most. Nathan Field lost both of his parents by the time he entered adolescence. Regardless of the fact that this kind of tragedy—and the level of trauma Nat went through especially—does not happen frequently, the few who do encounter it need the most help, support, encouragement, and love. I personally connected with the character of Nat, though, I lost one parent not both. Nat’s mother died of cancer when he was young and his father committed suicide a few years later because he could not cope with his grief. My father died of cancer when I was an adolescent and one of the biggest challenges that my brother and I faced was keeping our mother afloat with us. I can imagine how Nat felt that he must not have been good enough for his father if he left him alone. For that, I give Nat even more kudos for developing as well as he did throughout the rest of the book.

Nat’s emotional journey is typical for that of a child grieving a parent. For the first few chapters of the books, Nat does his best to avoid the topic of his parents. When his peers begin talking about parents, Nat leaves and says that he is “escaping, the way you always escape sooner or later if you don’t want to be…sympathized with and have to listen to all that mush, or worse, have to answer the next question…If you have to answer questions every time, how are you ever going to learn to forget?” (13) Initially, Nat thinks that he is better off forgetting and not thinking about his parents at all than he is reaching for memories, talking it out with those that care about him, and feeling emotional release. When the wound of loss is fresh, it feels better to avoid it entirely but eventually, it feels even better to share your experience and memories. Nat also has the same bitter feelings that I had in the first year after my father passed. He mocks Shakespeare’s line that “all will be well” and reminds himself that “all does not go well, terrible things happen to people and cannot be put right” (28). While the event itself cannot be put right, we learn to cope and use the experience in encouraging ourselves to do the best we can with what we do have.

The progress that Nat makes after his trip back in time is healthy. After refusing to address his plights, Nat has an emotional catharsis that he needed desperately. When Shakespeare hugs him like a makeshift-parent, he breaks down. Nat tells the reader, “To my absolute horror, I fell apart. It was the sudden warmth and sympathy, the fact that somebody understood…suddenly, hating it, I was in a flood of tears” (73). Nat is still bitter and doesn’t understand that this release is exactly what he needed. Just a few pages later, Nat taps the positive memory of his father and realizes that he’s developed. His epiphany comes when Shakespeare locks himself in his writing room, just like Nat’s father used to do. Nat says, “I stopped, remembering. My father had been a writer…I suddenly realized that I was thinking about him, without panic or tears, in a way I hadn’t done since he died” (82). Towards the end of the story, Nat improves even farther and tells his aunt, “I’d like to read [my father’s] poems” (180).

Like Nat, I had to learn how to cope. I initially avoided the thought of my father in public since it was easy to uncork a flood of tears like Nat’s. But then I began making positive connections from the memories that I had of him to the world I live in now—the one without him physically in it. Lucky for Nat, he may go home and read the writing of his father and find himself in it. As my father was not conveniently a writer, I’ve learned to see him in other places. In all honesty, from the time I started reading *King of Shadows* until the time I finished it, coincidences popped up everywhere, proving to me that my father is still here in some way. The sonnet that William gives Nat, sonnet 116, was randomly assigned to me to analyze in the Shakespeare course that I am currently taking; two seemingly random gentleman of my father’s age hugged me; and I had a dream in which I got to see my father laugh again.

I believe that the young adults who go through this kind of tragedy would identify heavily with this book. Those who have not would certainly find other reasons to become engaged in it. Nat’s trip back in time provides many moments that made me, as a reader, laugh audibly as his anachronism made his peers in the 1500s suspicious of his “wizardry.” Any reader in middle school or high school could also relate to Nat’s consistent questions about *why* things are happening to him and his consistent feeling of being lost, without a place in his own time. Adolescence is a time when we are given some responsibility but still expected to follow certain rules—it is our introduction to adulthood while still being treated like a child and we don’t really know where are place is in society yet. The plot progression is also engaging. I was truly in suspense about why exactly Nat was transported to Shakespeare’s time and the twist at the end with Arby was definitely a surprise. Though, as a reader I felt like it was a bit anticlimactic as I was expecting the reason to be that Nat had to learn something about himself. It turns out that the master plan was just to save Shakespeare and Nat’s amazing development was just a positive side effect.