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### The Residue Years

*The Residue Years* by Mitchell Jackson is, as its author describes, an autobiographical novel, which chronicles Champ, Jackson's alter-ego, and his trials and tribulations as a drug dealer trying to achieve the life that he had as a child before his mother, Grace, became a crack addict. Champ and his family deal with poverty, the criminal justice system, and the general burden bared by black inhabitants of a predominantly white city such as Portland, Oregon, where the story takes place. This all occurs as Champ tries to serve as the hero his mother, two younger brothers, and pregnant girlfriend need by purchasing a proper home, which he believes will bring back the stability he had earlier in life. Simultaneously, Grace is trying to reclaim custody of her two youngest sons, KJ and Canaan, from her ex husband, Kenny, who is a much more stable and capable parent.

In *Residue Years*, Champ is constantly risking everything to provide for his family. His cocaine dealing antics nearly cost him his life and do cost him his freedom at some point, as we find out in the beginning of the book, on many occasions, and this is all driven by the hope that he can reclaim the past. Earlier scenes in the book depict him and his mother wandering around Portland reminiscing about the life they lived before Grace's crack addition rattled their foundation. They lived in a relatively stable two parent household until the stress of splitting from her husband drove Grace to try to escape from her troubles in crack by the suggestion of

her former best friend, Dawn. Grace's habit becomes more unbreakable as the book goes on, while Champ becomes more entrenched in the dealing game. They're both trapped, and Champ has become hypnotized by the thought of the American Dream, believing that purchasing a home, a symbol of what once was, will somehow reverse past mistakes, and free his family.

The character of Champ is extremely flawed. He constantly cheats on his girlfriend, Kim, deals the very drug which destroyed his family, and seems to do these things with little to no remorse. Were he to exist in our everyday life, he may not be appreciated or tolerated the way he is when we read *Residue Years*. However, despite Champ's recklessness, general criminality and dishonesty, a child-like spirit is seen in him. He is doing all of this to serve the notion that if he can revive this one symbol of his childhood, a proper home, he can revive the past as a whole. It seems foolish, but it becomes extremely easy to admire Champ when one watches him continually put everything on the line to give this gift to his loved ones. Champ acknowledges that he is imperfect. He recognizes that he is not the best boyfriend, that he might not be a great father, that he has not been the best role model for his brothers, but the story gave me the feeling that he believed if he could perform this one outstanding deed for his family, he could transform into somebody more supportive and trustworthy.

The book is evenly split, alternating between Champ's and Grace's perspective throughout the story. When we view things through Grace's perspective, we see that her struggle is constantly perpetuated as she is continually haunted by the demons of her past. The vehicles for this haunting are the characters of Michael and Dawn, who serve as sort-of ghosts that are constantly barging in and disrupting the progress Grace has made toward leading a sober life.

Dawn, Grace's former best friend, represents Grace's descent into drug addiction. We are

first introduced to Dawn as a memory. The first chapter in the book, told from Grace's perspective, shows Grace at a meeting in her rehab facility. When deciding whether or not to lay out her struggle for the other addicts sitting in the circle with her, Grace's thoughts reveal to the reader that Dawn was the person who first introduce her to crack, and that she brought Champ with her during this first occurrence, when he was only a young child. This is our first peek into Champ's and Grace's past. We now only know Dawn as the instigator in terms of Grace's addiction. Later on Champ runs into Dawn while he's driving around with a friend about to make a deal. He sees Dawn standing under a street light and describes her as looking half dead. This comes towards the middle of the plot line when Grace is on the brink of a major relapse, succumbing to the stress of trying to gain custody back of her two young sons. In a sense, she is half dead. Dawn, the instigator of Grace's addiction now mirrors the state Grace is in after going down the path of crack. Throughout the story, Dawn is a sort-of ghostly figure whose presence mirrors the struggles that Grace endures.

Michael is a friend Grace's from her pre-rehab days. His character represents crack as a whole, in relation to Grace, and the constant temptation to backslide into her life of addiction. At the peak of her past drug use, Michael joined Grace many times as they would go on multiple-day binges. Throughout *Residue Years*, Michael is able to guide Grace back to old habits at her weakest points, particularly when she is worried about not gaining back custody of her sons. Michael's presence in Grace's life is the equivalent to that of drugs, no matter how hard Grace tries, he is able to draw her in when she is at her most vulnerable.

The story is engaging and authentic. Grace and Champ are not only extremely flawed at their own expense, but they constantly disrupt the stability of those around them. Grace breaks

our heart as an addict trying to regain custody of her children, though she can barely get through a week without falling back into her old habits. Champ torments his girlfriend with his infidelity and his being cryptic in trying to hide his drug dealing antics. We loath their decisions and root for them wholeheartedly all at the same time. Jackson's raw and un-sugar coated language, full of slang, profanity and random bursts of grandiose vocabulary choices, make us feel as if we know Champ. His voice is so specific and builds an amazing reader-to-character connection. Grace's sad and deluded belief that she will be able to gain her sons back, despite the large disparity between what she can provide verses what Kenny can, draws true pity from the reader. The book is written without quotation marks, which, at first off-putting, eventually causes it to effortlessly flow as if Champ and Grace were telling us the story in person.

*The Residue Years* is a story about trying to go home, however the old adage "You can't go home again" rings very true in the instance of this story. Jackson's "autobiographical novel" is about the lengths one will go to be a hero to their family, even when the end result seems impossible to attain. Most of all it's about struggle and what it takes to stay on your feet when the world you live in is constantly in a state of deterioration. I would recommend this story to anyone looking to become engaged in a bittersweet story about addiction, trying to achieve the American Dream, and what it means to take care of one's family against all odds.