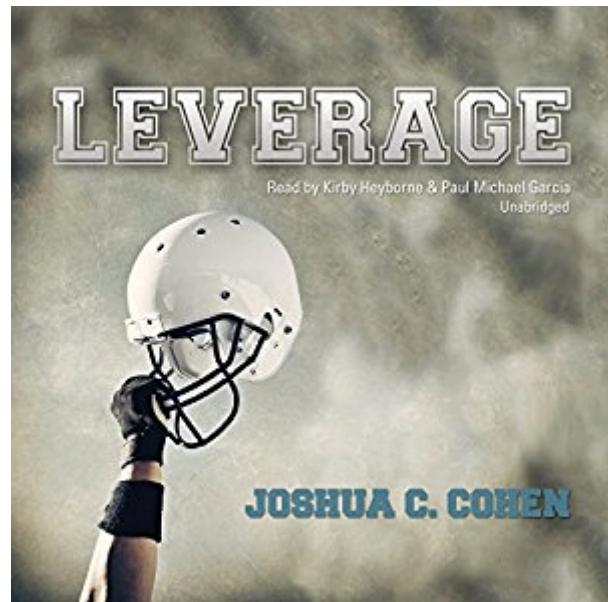


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Leverage



Synopsis

Part Friday Night Lights by H. G. Bissinger, part Outsiders by S. E. Hinton, this debut young-adult novel tells the incredibly powerful story of bullying and how-taken to the extreme-it can wreak havoc on the lives of teenagers. Kurt is a talented but emotionally damaged football player. Danny is a rising star on the gymnastics team, an outsider in a school where the football team rules. But the two form an unlikely friendship, and when one member of the gym team is viciously assaulted by the quarterback and his cronies, Kurt rises to his defense and challenges the entrenched stereotypes of high-school sports. Reminiscent of the early work of Markus Zusak, this is that rare book that authentically captures the voices, fierce loyalties, and harsh justice of teenage boys.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Short Version: Gritty, intense and emotional, Leverage is a striking blend of friendship, bullying, and coming of age. With two stunningly well developed male protagonists and a setting that is easy for any reader to relate to and understand, there are some poignant and gutting truths presented throughout, both blatantly and subtly. Though upper YA in content and language, and holding some scenes that are hard to stomach, Leverage holds nothing back when it comes to realism and impact.

The Extended Version: Danny is a sophomore late for puberty and small in size, but a beast in the gym and on the parallel bars. Used to being pushed around and bullied, Danny does what he can to survive the day to day in a school run by massive football jocks. He is quiet but friendly, despite his large sense of self perseverance even to the point of a fault. Danny is able to see other

points of view, and generally understands the meaning of being on a team and loyalty. Despite this, however, Danny's weak and even hypocritical side is shown, fleshing him out into a multidimensional character. There are some scenes where he is admittedly someone to hate, but put in the setting Cohen has created and the build up to each of these events, his side is completely presented and understandable. Kurt is misunderstood on so many levels, coming from a heartbreakingly rough past. Holding plenty of his own demons and baggage, he is the epitome of a gentle soul that has been broken a few times too many. He is huge in size, and certainly has hints of a darker side and a temper but as with Danny, Cohen has created the perfect blend of hints of danger and a side to dislike without letting it overrun the redeemable, respectable, and honorable sides of him. Kurt has a stutter, and his self image is affected appropriately, but he still maintains a certain air about him that sets him apart from many of his peers, especially on the football field. The changes in his mindset throughout the book, sparked by the varying events, is captivating and engaging in a way not many authors can nail. There are several side characters that all have a powerful role in the book, some driving the plot more directly than others. The chain of events and snowball effect of things comes through strongly, and the back and forth between the different sports groups sets the stage perfectly. From the redeemable to the downright disgusting, each one is memorable in their own way. Throughout the book, there is a very strong reminder of the notion that it is easy to judge from the outside, but not so easy to do "the right thing" when actually in the rough position. The bullying aspect, mixed in with the prank war but certainly more dangerous than any normal prank, carries a strong part of this book and Cohen has beautifully weaved the stories of not only a prime target but someone torn between his teammates who lead the pack and not stooping to that level. The prime shifting point of this book is completely unexpected and grotesque, sending shockwaves through the reader that last for the rest of the book. The concepts of bravery and facing fears, along with a beautiful blurring of right and wrong, lurk constantly through the story. There are beautiful and memorable messages and impacts, both subtle and slap in the face worthy. Things keep a steady pace, some parts of the book progressing quickly before easing down and showing the full fall out and impact. While there is quite a bit of language, it isn't for shock value or filler. Cohen's intentions behind the use of every word is very clear, and has a strengthening effect overall. Admittedly, this is a very testosterone driven book, rapt with the male perspective but isn't particularly sexual or even stereotypical in regards to boys. The focus of this book is on Danny and Kurt, and Cohen sticks to that endlessly and beautifully. From the steroids to the pranks to the final outcome, everything is, ultimately centered around these two boys and their responses and reactions to everything. No single event washes out the character focus, and watching the changes

in both boys and their growing friendship is warming and encouraging. Cohen does a remarkable job making the dual perspectives different, both of them distinct and readable while still being clearly something individual. While it is exhausting to read Kurt's constant stuttering, it serves its purpose in letting the reader know full force what things are like for him. There are some gutting and unthinkable scenes in this book, but they are written in a way that isn't graphic despite how clear it is what is actually happening. With several explosive scenes and a few smoothly inserted and unexpected twists, Leverage grabs the reader from the first page and doesn't let go even at the last one. With a soft but potent focus on right and wrong, and a lasting chain of events, this one shows many sides of human nature and differing personalities while throwing a shocking gauntlet at the characters. Cohen's overall striking and beautifully developed characterization carries this book in a bold way, giving it a long lasting impact with lingering messages, presented in a very straightforward but effective way.

Because the writing is good, I'll give it 3 stars, even though it really irritated me in places. I found the bad guys to be one-dimensional stereotypes (steroid crazed, sadist rapist football players, along with the win-at-all cost high school football coach, opportunistic foster mom, corrupt policeman). The "good guys" are stupid and/or cowardly for most of the book. Why would you go hunting (alone in the woods) with the evil guys that already want to kill you? Why would you finally take your evidence to the authority figure you trust the least? While incidents serviced the plot, they frustrated me as a reader wanting to sympathize with the protagonists. But the thing that grated on me the most was the bully/torture scenes (of which there are many) that went on and on and on....All of this builds toward a long-await, pent-up desire for a payoff, which I guess is good story-telling. Unfortunately, by the time we finally got to the ending, I mostly felt tired and manipulated.

Sports fiction will always have a special place in my heart because it combines two of my favorite things: sports and... well... fiction (okay, shut up). I grew up with Dan Gutman and Mike Lupica, but I think Leverage was probably my first venture into older teen sports fiction, and definitely my first one about football (which, might I add, is my all-time favorite spectator sport). I know by the blurb, it sounds like another Friday Night Lights, another head-butting, sweat-packed story about the strength that goes into football and the tough friendships formed along the way, but isn't-it definitely isn't. Leverage is much, much more: It's deeper, more tragic, and more grueling than any other sports novel I've read before, and it's an unexpectedly jarring, as well as unexpectedly hopeful story that everyone should be aware of. There are so many different issues tackled in Leverage, including

the nit 'n' grit of two very competitive varsity sports teams, the treacherous social structure of high school, and an unspeakable crime against innocence, that all throw outsider, Danny Meehan, into chaos. A determined gymnast and self-proclaimed "nobody," Danny knows better than to mess with Oregrove High's most powerful social circle: the football players. It hasn't been too long since I last cheered on my own high school football team in the stands, so I knew exactly the atmosphere, exactly the rush of the crowd, that Cohen portrays. I do feel his evocation is a bit exaggerated, because never have I met such mean high schoolers, nor such brutal teenagers, but then again, I'm no Danny Meehan; having never gone to school actually fearing for my safety, I've probably never noticed the great, disastrous social divide. When Kurt Brodsky, a terrifying rock of a fullback with a mysterious, painful past, treads softly onto Oregrove's social scene, Danny sees the school's dynamic doing a fabulous turnover. Suddenly, football players actually seem human, and he even builds up a little bit of courage for himself. All of this comes crashing down when he alone witnesses an inconceivable act of violence, and then is forced to live with the guilt of the ramifications that succeed it. The hazardous burdens upon a faultless witness, as well as the morality that separates the bystanders from the perpetrators, are embodied seamlessly within Danny's conscience. I think Leverage is a book that everyone should be talking about, just for the hundred and one issues it raises on current events such as child abuse, sports security, and bullying. I'm afraid to say anymore because I don't know if I could without spoiling the story/fangirling hard, but I will leave you with this: Leverage presents the darkest, most horrifying tragedy you could probably imagine in a contemporary teenage setting. I place this work of young adult fiction apart from others because while others may convey equal brute and equal atrocity, none has ever been so real, so realistic. Now, if Leverage was a film, it would be rated R, not only for disturbing content, but also for some language, violence, and sexuality. (Not that any of it was enough to bother me--with the exception of one stomach-dropping scene that literally made me tremble--but just a warning: this is most certainly not your sweet, chaste young adult read! I repeat, this is NOT YOUR SWEET, CHA-) Someone cut me off. Anyway. I love Cohen's voice. Leverage is split up into two narratives: one of the smart, smart-assy Danny, and one of the worn and leather-hard, but still tender Kurt. The high school dynamic is perfectly captured--from the tiny little observances regarding teachers and their inability to ever be subtle, down to the reeking of every boys' locker rooms (don't ask me how I know what a boys' locker room smells like)--and this is mainly the reason why Leverage is so true-to-life, and why it hits so close to home. Like I mentioned before, some of the secondary characters (e.g. the inflatedly brainless football players and the overly determined coaches) are a bit too much; I understand the author meant to caricaturize specific stereotypes within these supporting

characters, but it did make the story slightly unrealistic. Fortunately, our two protagonists are perfectly proportioned and perfectly probed, which contributed a lot to my enjoyment of the book. Kurt was an easy character to like--the gentle giant with a huge heart. The slow uncovering of his secretive past is riveting, and his ultimate triumph astonishing. I loved reading about him warming up to Oregrove, and eventually overcoming his darkest of demons. Danny was more difficult to sympathize with, even though he's portrayed as the "victim" in many cases, so scrawny and well, kind of a geek, as he is. His attitude is generally snobby and condescending (even on top of his acknowledgement of being at the bottom of the high school social ladder), but it helps shape the plot of the book; in fact, the shift we victoriously see within Danny is what shapes the entire climax, in the first place. While I can't say I immediately liked him, I can say he's a well-fleshed, well-written character essential to the book's procession. Cohen did an excellent job with the main characters. Leverage is vicious and emotionally searing, but there's a lyrical ending note that makes it all worth it in the end. Leverage is definitely a harsh ride, but there are some weighty issues within it that readers will pick up and take to heart. I am truly impressed with Cohen's accurate representation of the modern high school dynamic, his hard-hitting revelations on injustice and corruption within a sports system, and the disturbing, crude consequences of teenage bullying he reveals is prevalent in society today. The overall complexity and depth of this simply-presented novel astound me.

Pros: Nothing is held back; raw, crude, vicious // Great portrayal of a high school // FOOTBALL! Need I say more? // Impressively dynamic characters // Intricate plot // Easy to read and follow

Cons: Some characters are too stereotypical // Flow of the writing sometimes gets dull

Verdict: Leverage is a coming-of-age football novel that holds no barriers and has no inhibitions. It will take your breath away and have your blood pumping madly; the adrenaline players feel, readers will definitely feel, and that rush--that delirious heart-pounding, throbbing, thrilling sensation--will reverberate effortlessly through their spines. Tragic, appalling, but all-the-while confident and anchored in tone, this young adult story about the power of perseverance and the importance of keeping courage--even if only for a few minutes longer--is sure to be a crowd-pleaser. Fans will go wild over Joshua C. Cohen's stunning debut.

Rating: 9 out of 10 hearts: Loved it!

This book has a spot on my favorites shelf.

Source: Complimentary copy provided by author in exchange for an honest and unbiased review (thank you!)

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