



The Promise of Jesse Woods

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2017 *Christianity Today* “Award of Merit” winner

The summer of 1972 was the most pivotal of Matt Plumley’s childhood. While his beloved Pirates battle for back-to-back World Series titles, Matt’s family moves from Pittsburgh to Dogwood, West Virginia, where his father steps into the pulpit of a church under the thumb of town leader Basil Blackwood. A fish out of water, Matt is relieved to forge a fast bond with two unlikely friends: Dickie Darrel Lee Hancock, a mixed-race boy, and Jesse Woods, a tough-as-nails girl with a sister on her hip and no dad in sight.

As the trio traipses the hills and hollers, Matt begins to fall for Jesse, and their promises to each other draw him deeper into her terrifying reality. One night, the wrath of the Blackwoods and the secrets of Jesse’s family collide, and Matt joins Jesse in a rescue that saves one life and ends another . . . and severs the bond of their friendship.

Years later, Matt is pulled back to Dogwood and to memories of that momentous summer by news of Jesse’s upcoming wedding. He could never shake the feeling that there was more to the story of that fateful night, and he’s determined to learn the truth behind the only promise Jesse Woods ever broke.

The Promise of Jesse Woods Details

Date : Published July 1st 2016 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

ISBN :

Author : Chris Fabry

Format : Kindle Edition 433 pages

Genre : Christian Fiction, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Christian, Young Adult, Coming Of Age

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From Reader Review *The Promise of Jesse Woods* for online ebook

JonathanT says

Overall I enjoyed the story, setting, and prose, but I wasn't a fan of how the author advanced the plot. By withholding important backstory information (and frequently alluding to said information), he keeps readers dying to know exactly what happened all those years ago and why it matters. Basically, it's an appeal to curiosity.

But don't get me wrong; that's absolutely a valid way to keep readers flipping the pages! The problem arises when reader engagement relies almost entirely on the withheld information. Take that one element away from *The Promise of Jesse Woods*, and I don't think the characters and events themselves would create a particularly compelling novel. I could be wrong, and I did enjoy a lot of this, so I'd say it earned its three stars. Minus one star for what I explained, and minus another star for about ten quibbles which I won't go into hahaha. (Best for ages 16+.)

Rebekah Love Dorris says

My husband is a very disciplined reader.

Unlike his wife, he is somehow able to set a book down at the end of a chapter and pick up the next day. I am in awe, like an addict who wonders how people can stop at just one.

The Promise of Jesse Woods has done something that few, if any, books have ever done. My husband fell asleep at 4:00 in the morning, unable to hold his eyes open another second, after reading page after page, chapter after chapter.

My husband's thirst to flip to the next page says it all. If you like picking up books you can't put down, you're about to have a new favorite for your shelf.

Without giving away the story, which is woven expertly enough that you'll want to plan a significant chunk of time so you won't have to put it down, here are the elements that make this book something special.

The Characters

Matt Plumley is an overweight preacher's kid approaching adolescence in his new Appalachian town, Dogwood, West Virginia.

Jesse Woods is an unkempt, tough-talking, emerald-blue-eyed womanchild everybody calls "trash."

Dickie Darrell Lee Hancock is a glasses-wearing army brat with a black father and a white mother who only hopes his dad will survive Vietnam.

The Story

Matt is a quiet kid smarting from the absence of his big brother when he moves to Dogwood, his father's hometown where the family has been called to minister.

Lonely and self-conscious, he hops on his bike and wanders down the dusty road. When he's confronted by a dilemma – a horse is injured but no one's around to help – his decision to act reveals his need to make a difference, and he is rewarded with two new friends. Even if his MawMaw is scandalized by his choice of companions.

As the moral compass to his delinquent flock, he begins to see the world through the eyes of “the least of these.”

As the summer of 1972 progresses, over glowing embers with specks of roasted marshmallows on their cheeks, the trio forms a bond that will shape each of their identities. A spit and a promise determine the courses of their futures.

One thing Matt knows for sure is that the people around him need help. What he has yet to learn is that he does too.

Why This Book Will Become a Classic

Aside from the story which captures you by the throat from the get-go, the description is indescribable. Just try reading this book without grabbing someone to read them a paragraph or two. You can't; you'll bust. That, or you're a more disciplined reader than I am.:)

On meeting new friends:

“...A big-boned girl came up beside me. She had the same red hair and light complexion as the boy playing basketball. She stared at me with abject fascination, then pulled at her dress, which could not hide her large frame or budding femininity. Her hair was short and she had the first signs of acne. Her upper lip didn't reach all the way to the lower one, so she had the countenance of a chipmunk.

“‘You the preacher's boy?’ she said.

“I introduced myself, holding out a hand. She took it daintily, like she wasn't sure how to respond, and dipped her head in a curtsy like I was royalty. ‘I'm Shur-uhl,’ she said. Later I learned that this was short for Shirley and her last name was Turley, and I immediately felt both sorrow for her and contempt for her parents. I also learned that Shirl's father, Burl, had been a leader in the church but had died several years earlier and that the Turleys and the Blackwoods were cousins and stuck closer than worms in a can.

“‘I'm not going to be eatin' anything at the picnic,’ Shirl said.

“I wasn't sure why she would offer such personal information, but I couldn't think of anything to say but ‘Why not?’

“‘Upset stomach. Mommy made me all the whipped cream I could eat last night. Once you get started, you can't stop.’

“I nodded.”

On Matt's new town:

“Dogs barked and stretched at chains. Chickens clucked, and along the road a meandering creek worked its way through the countryside like a wet scar. Rusty mailboxes hung to rotting wooden posts. Gnats buzzed about my head and gargantuan flies lit on my back and drew blood before I felt the sting. I would discover these were horseflies.”

“Fireflies rose from the earth like prayers. Locals called them lightning bugs. When we used to come here on vacation, we'd poke holes in mason jar lids and use the jars as lanterns. We'd put in grass to keep the bugs comfy, but they would be dead in a day or two. Living in Dogwood took all the fun out of lightning bugs.”

On Jesse Woods:

“She had dirty-blond hair and was barefoot. Her cutoff jeans were a little too big for her frame, but she had strung a piece of rope through the belt loops as a belt. The shorts were frayed white and her T-shirt had faded to a cream color that looked almost brown against her milky-white skin. When the dog stuck his head out from under the house and barked, she yelled, ‘Shut your yap,’ and Carl obeyed.

“As she drew closer, I saw her lithe, wiry frame, thin legs and arms. She moved like a cat with no wasted motion. She crossed her arms in front of her and I noticed her fingernails were cut to the quick. Her cheeks were filled with freckles and when I caught sight of her blue eyes, I nearly forgot why I had walked up to the house. I had read about such beauty in books and about people so caught up with seeing someone that their heart nearly skipped a beat, but I had never experienced the feeling until now.

“‘You're not from around here, are you?’ she said.

“She was a little taller than me, but not much, and two of her front teeth sat forward from the rest as if trying to get a better view.

‘No.’”

I'll refrain from sharing any more, but it's hard. Add to that a gripping plot and you'll see why reading this book is pure pleasure.

The Main Reason I Love This Book

This book shines the light on the invisible people, the ones no one acknowledges or invites to their parties. Those that sat in darkness shine in the spotlight of this book.

This book honors the least of these. It's a gift to the world – both to those who've never been treated with honor and to those who will discover the richness of honoring them. Inasmuch as we've done it unto the least of these, His brethren, Jesus says, we've done it unto Him. This book will inspire much good to be done to both.

The story, like life, is unpredictable. I didn't see the end coming. After chewing on it, I decided I liked the ending. Just like in my life, things haven't always ended like I planned, they ended the way they should've. That's how this book is. It doesn't end bad, just realistically. Don't expect all the loose ends to get fixed. Some hurts must wait for heaven to heal. Some perps must wait for Judgment Day. It's coming, though.

I flat love this book. I highly recommend it, most especially for anyone ages 35-55. They'll be most likely to appreciate the cultural descriptions of the time period. That doesn't mean my 12-year old won't like it. People with hangups about skin color or class structure might not enjoy it, though.

Tyndale provided this book to me free for my honest review. I'm in love with Tyndale. That is all.

Karin says

There is a good reason why Chris Fabry has won several writing awards; he can write well. This is no light, fluffy, happy-ever-after romance--it's not a romance at all, actually--but a well written, poignant, pithy novel that deals with some challenging issues, including racism, classism, child neglect and abuse among others. Yes, it's a Christian novel, but the Matt Plumlely, both a twenty-something adult and an overweight young teen who has been moved from Chicago to his dad's hometown in West Virginia whose first friends are a black boy, Dickie, missing his father who is fighting in Viet Nam and a "white trash" young girl, Jesse, who spends much of her time caring for her ailing mother and her three year old sister. The past is revisited as Matt returns home after hearing that Jesse is about to marry someone he remembers from his youth; someone from a nasty, hateful family that he is sure Jesse shouldn't be with.

Jocelyn Green says

I was so sad for this book to come to an end! I adored it. Firmly set in a historical time period, it was unmistakably character-driven with characters that are so sharply distinctive and believable I felt like I was right there on scene with them. Amazing storytelling, powerful message. This novel made me want to cry out of heartache and for joy. Whew! So glad it won a Christy Award in 2017. If you enjoy authors Ann Tatlock or Susie Finkbeiner, you'll enjoy this one too. (I listened to the Audible narration and I would highly recommend it. The author reads his own book and just nails all the voices with their accents and inflections. It definitely added to the experience for me.)

Joleen says

Well...I don't think I've ever finished a book I so clearly loved (it's 2am and I could NOT put it down) but at the same time hate.

I am so conflicted! Do I love a book because it held my attention? Because the characters are so well done that it was like I was right there with them? Because the writing is gripping and drew on my emotion like few books ever have?

And then close the book hating how the characters kept secrets, manipulated each other, how someone believed that if (in Christian and fatherly love) he made decisions for his child altering his future, that he was actually doing it for his son's own good. Can I hate that true friends walked away from each other in pain? Can I hate that a pastor could be so manipulated by the town bully, but not see how he was doing the same to his child? Or that a sad girl with nothing, having had everything taken away from her except the land left to her by her mother, is not good enough for their son?

Oh, how I was both bothered by how things did NOT work out the way I was sure they would (or should),

and fascinated by how I was completely thrown. The author made every moment of friendship, duty, protection and love so fun, hopeful and painfully raw all in one story.

I want to give this 1 star because it made me so mad, but I have to give it 5 stars because it made me think, feel deeply, and (yawn) stay up too late to finish. It can't be bad if all that happens in one book. So five-stars it is.

Maybe when I've had a chance to mull it all over, and after a few hour of sleep, I may write my typical synopsis. There's just too much in the book to do it adequate justice tonight.

Hannah Rodriguez says

I liked the story a lot. The story gets four stars but the writing style and connecting with the characters fell a little flat and seems more like three. it was engaging-- but I feel like it should have had some more parts to connect and not so much just to tell. since my mom really liked this and recommended it, I'll go with four. xD

Schuyler says

4.5 stars. There was no option but to read this in one day. No option at all. THIS is good storytelling.

PG-13 rating for mature content. PM for details if I don't get around to posting it soon.

Karen says

A seriously good read, one you won't easily forget, as the characters attach themselves to your heart! The writing is flawless, peppered with lovely southern phrases and quirky people. Told from the first person perspective of a young man, looking back at the eventful summer he turned 14 when his family moved from Pittsburgh to Dogwood, W. Virginia.

The story flows well from beginning to the end even though it jumps between two time periods; they are woven seamlessly together. It had me laughing out loud (so often that I had to read aloud sections to explain why), sighing and gasping, feeling angry and sad, sometimes all on the same page. Not a light read as it touches on some difficult subjects, like racism, poverty, bullying and abuse. Stayed up late just to find out how it all resolved. Glad that I skipped the synopsis on this one and just let the story unfold on its own; so much better that way.

A moving coming of age story, heartfelt and timeless, an instant add to my favorites list. Highly recommend! 5+ stars!

Wendy Bunnell says

I picked up this book as it was in the “new release” rack when I was returning my last audiobook to the library, and needed something to listen to while commuting this week. I liked what I saw in the description, the settings in West Virginia in 1972 and 1984, and the description of the plot. I had no idea that it was a book of Christian fiction, and also I didn't realize that the author was narrating his own audiobook. About the narration, the author did a great job and sounded like a pro. About the degree to which Christian faith dominated the book, that was a little heavy handed. If you can get past that, the story is decent and the characters are quite compelling.

I had one big gripe with the book: All of the adults were terrible. Neither of Matt's parents were even remotely likable. Jesse and Dickey didn't have decent parents either, and none of the other adults in town are anything other than monsters, at least until Matt gets to high school and meets the drama teacher. The single most likable adult is Matt's piano teacher, who drinks from a flask during lessons, as she at least lets Matt watch his favorite baseball team in the playoffs on her tv. His own parents seem to enjoy denying him this small pleasure after him dragging away from his old life in Pittsburgh into this joyless hellhole where they interfere with his attempts to make friends. Just awful, and not all that believable.

It was a compelling and fast moving read, but ultimately very unsatisfying. There were big plot holes which didn't bridge the gap between 1972 and 1984, such as why is Dickey reaching out to Matt to be the one person who tells Matt about Jesse's impending wedding when Dickey and Matt had never reconciled and Matt doesn't even bother to see him for the many days in 1984 when he's in town. Matt goes to visit his weight-obsessed uncle and every member of the Turley family, but not Dickey? That doesn't make any sense, as well as other things that dealt with the big secret / promise eluded to in the title and every chapter right up to the end. A lot of this doesn't make any sense.

I didn't hate it, but I am also not compelled to track down anything else by the author, unless he's narrating the audiobook, as that was actually very well done.

Staci says

Such a beautiful coming of age novel. The Promise of Jesse Woods is set in both 1972 and 1984 in Dogwood, West Virginia. The main characters are a preacher's son (Matt), a girl from a very poor family (Jesse) and the son of a white woman and black man (Dickie). These three form a strong bond of friendship in 1972 when Matt moves from Pennsylvania to Dogwood. This novel was incredibly emotional and had my heart singing and my heart breaking.

The huge amount of time period information added to my enjoyment of the novel. Here's a paragraph example: "There's a preacher on the radio that says the Beatles are trying to hypnotize us and turn us all into Communists. I was listening to 'Hey Jude' the other day and I had the urge to move to Cuba, so there might be something to it."

The main theme of the book is that while we can help others, it's not our role to be another person's savior. That responsibility belongs to God.

It was a beautifully written novel and I was deeply invested in the characters. This is my third Chris Fabry

novel and I look forward to reading more of his work.

My gratitude to Rel of RelzReviews and publisher Tyndale for a complimentary copy of this novel. The opinions expressed are my own.

Caroline says

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C.J. Darlington says

When I read Fabry's novel "June Bug" I knew I was in the hands of a skilled wordsmith. Then "The Promise of Jesse Woods" came into my hands, and I realized it anew. Fabry takes us back to Dogwood, WV (where he's set several books) and tells the story of Matt both in 1972 when he's fourteen, and many years later in the 80s when he's all grown up and looking back. As an author myself I understand it's a feat for a writer to weave in a present and past story so seamlessly that we aren't jarred as readers, but that's exactly what Fabry does. The suspense builds like the crescendo of a symphony, and Jesse Woods and Matt's other friends and family become full and multi-faceted before our eyes. The Promise of Jesse Woods reminds me of To Kill A Mockingbird in the way it touches on racism, poverty, and justice, but Fabry also weaves in a beautiful faith thread which never feels forced. It's lyrical yet also down-to-earth. Deep yet never overwhelming. This is real-life storytelling that's effortless to read and will leave you wanting more from Fabry's pen.

Leigh says

I am not sure what to write about this book.... I enjoyed reading it but wasn't riveted but at the same time struggled to put it down. I loved the character most of the time but at the same time, just wanted them to grow a backbone, there was only one character who had one during the whole book, then lost it at the very end, and that didn't make sense to me. Over all this book was a really enjoyable read and thought provoking with great character but just missing that extra development within the character to make it a 5 star read. Note:* To many baseball references that I never understood the significance to the story that just felt like waste of space. (Maybe because I am Australian and baseball is basically a non existent sport here... also why it a World Series if it doesn't involve the world?)

Soleil says

Matt is just living a normal life when he finds out his best friend Jesse is soon marrying. Memories resurface from his childhood in the 70s, and Matt quickly heads home to decipher all that is happening.

So, this book wasn't all that bad, I just didn't enjoy it all that much. The reason(s)? The characters were good, but I didn't feel like the main character changed a whole lot by the end of the story like the author was wanting. It just felt like there was a lot of words trying to keep you busy until the end of the book. Generally

I enjoy books that go back in time while in present time, but I wasn't much of a fan of it in this book. Though the author was trying to give some backstory on the main character, his friends, and what was going on in the story, some of it just wasn't needed.

I will say Chris Fabry did a good job in describing the settings and characters, but overall it isn't a book that I will be recommending to everyone as a must read.

Genre: Historical Fiction, Contemporary Fiction.

Rating 2.7 out of 5 stars.

I received this book free from Tyndale Blog Network for an honest review.

Amariah Dixon says

Rating: 4 1/2 stars.

(Review to come!)
