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Coping With the Death of a Parent

Ronald Barron

Rev. of Holding Steady by Stephen Schwandt. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, reissue 1996. 176 pages. Paper. \$5.95. and rev. of A Teacher's Guide to Holding Steady by Stephen Schwandt. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1996. 28 pages. Paper. \$10.95.

Young adults respond to books in which teen characters deal with problems which do not have simple solutions. They also like books in which characters act and talk like the people in their own lives. Finally, teenagers appreciate well-plotted books which contain adventure and an element of danger for the major characters. Stephen Schwandt's YA novel Holding Steady (reissued by Free Spirit Publishing,

1996) holds up well when measured against these three YA litmus tests. In fact, Judith Beckman and Elizabeth Belden, in their English Journal review of the book when it was first published in hardcover, contended "the book illustrates the high quality possible in adolescent literature."

Brendon Turner, a 17-year-old haunted by the sudden death of his father in an auto accident, experiences feelings of guilt, anger, and frustration as he works through his reactions to his father's death. Complicating the situation is the difference he sees in the relationship his brother Ross had with their father, a closeness Brendon attributes in part to Ross's basketball ability, and the apparent ease with which Ross had been able to deal with their father's death.

The summer after the accident, the Turner family vacations on Washington Island, just off Wisconsin's Door Peninsula, in an attempt to gain respite from the tragedy. The Door Peninsula, an area Schwandt knows well because of his childhood vacations and because Schwandt and his wife built a summer home there in 1985, provides an interesting backdrop for the story, and the Channel Challenge, a sailboat race from Washington Island to Rock Island, provides sufficient dramatic action for most readers. A rivalry with Clayton Wills, a local tough guy, adds to the action as Clayton goads Brendon into a fight, which Brendon wins, but which earns him the hatred of Clayton who vows revenge.

While on Washington Island, Brendon meets Courtney Holmes, an independent young woman learning to trust her father, a recovering alcoholic, and trying to assess her current relationship with him. Although Brendon is immediately attracted to Courtney, he finds it difficult at first to open up to her and to break out of the rut he has gotten himself into since the death of his father.

The major attraction of this book, however, is how Brendon comes to understand his father and his relationship with him. During an impromptu sailing venture from Washington Island to the mainland, an experience his father had always talked about trying, Brendon and Courtney are nearly killed during a severe storm. Later, reassessing what he did and why he did it, Brendon learns that he, like his father, is attracted to what he calls The Edge—challenges that are attractive because of their danger—and that this attraction can bring him close to destroying himself and others, but that it also brings a heightened sense of aliveness and makes him strong.

The book provides sufficient action

to hold a wide range of readers, but at the same time it tackles issues of sufficient complexity to stimulate the thinking of the most mature readers in a class.

On its own merits, Holding Steady would justify purchase for use in high school classrooms. However, A Teacher's Guide to Holding Steady, written by Schwandt, a veteran English teacher from the Mounds View School District, adds to the value of the book for classroom use. The Teacher's Guide includes "short write" topics, notebook topics, formal essay topics, and chapter-by-chapter study questions, small group discussion projects, and a 4-page objective test (Schwandt's "Trivia Extravaganza") which provide a cornucopia of useful materials that can assist teachers in helping their students develop essential learning skills while reading the novel. Schwandt wisely prefaces each section of these study materials with the words "some possible" providing teachers with the option of using the items intact or as models for materials of their own design, thus making them useful for both novice and experienced teachers. Teachers who may be using A Teacher's Guide to the Last Goodie (released in 1995 by Free Spirit Publishing) which Schwandt wrote for his novel The Last Goodie will already be familiar with the high quality of Schwandt's study materials.

Holding Steady and A Teacher's Guide to Holding Steady are available from Free Spirit Publishing, Inc., 400 First Avenue North, Suite 616, Minneapolis, MN 55401. Teachers may want to use their toll-free number (800-735-7323).

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