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COMPLICATED CHOICES

Risa Nyman

Immortal Works LLC (268 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

A teenager finds untapped strength to keep her family together in Nyman's YA novel.

As 17-year-old Claire Jackson pushes a baby stroller through the park, the reader initially gets the impression that she is an unwed mother. But the infant, Harry, is her half brother, the issue of her divorced mother Melanie's one-night stand. This misadventure has rendered Melanie a basket case who spends her days at home in T-shirts and sweatpants and who cannot begin to take care of Harry—so it all falls to big sister Claire. She resents the responsibility; on the other hand, she becomes fiercely protective of the little guy. The villain of the piece is Claire's uncle, Pat (Melanie's brother), who has always been a jerk and a bully. Pat sees Harry as an embarrassment that should be rectified—he believes Harry should somehow be disappeared—and he plays upon Melanie's vulnerability in pursuit of this goal. For Claire, he has nothing but disdain. But Claire does have allies, chiefly her best friend, Madison "Mads" Sunday, a boy-crazy ditz who's unfailingly loyal, and the new boy at school, Chad Williams. Not only is Chad incredibly attractive, he's wise beyond his years and has a passion for justice and for protecting the underdog. Could a romance be in the cards for Claire and Chad? The novel is narrated by Claire, a plucky, smart-mouthed adolescent. She is a wonderful creation, a resolute fighter not only for Harry, but also for her mother, whom she has good reason to hate. She is more mature than many of the supposed grown-ups she encounters while dealing with the insecurities and anger that are part of adolescence. The author is a distinctive writer with a knack for the arresting phrase, as when Claire recounts, "My words race out like they're passengers on a burning train," and concludes, "Once a secret is told, it floats in zero gravity: weightless and without power."

A wise and well-plotted novel of embattled adolescence graced with a memorable hero.

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