

**Nick Hornby, *About a Boy* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998)**

**Reviewed by Julie E. Heldt**

Will Lightman is a 36-year-old modern-day Londoner, a perpetually unemployed bachelor living off the royalties of his father's pop Christmas hit song. His time is spent watching daytime television, calculating his "coolness" factor with the help of glossy magazine questionnaires, taking the occasional weekend getaway, and some causal dating. "It was all a dreamy alternative reality that didn't touch his real life, whatever that was, at all" (p. 82).

Nick Hornby's story begins with the development of Will's latest "occupation": masquerading as the recently divorced father of an imaginary son at a local single-parent support group. Will's purpose and hope is to meet beautiful single mothers who, from his deductions, are subconsciously only interested in sexy rebound relationships. Quite comfortable in his shallow existence, Will unexpectedly finds himself caught in the middle of a potentially meaningful relationship when he meets the twelve-year-old son of a depressed hippie single mother. Marcus is prematurely wise but terribly "uncool." He begins to threaten Will's alternative reality. Will "had imagined entering their world, he hadn't foreseen that they might be able to penetrate his. [Marcus] was one of life's visitors; [Will] didn't want to be visited" (p. 105).

Marcus, who in many ways is Will's polar opposite, interferes in Will's current scheme to maintain an endless stream of superficial relationships when he begins to frequent Will's flat, uninvited. "Will didn't like the connection he had made very much, because it meant that if he had any decency in him at all he would have to take Marcus under his wing, use his own experience of growing up with a batty parent to guide the boy through to a place of safety. He didn't want to do that, though. It was too much work, and involved too much contact with people he didn't understand and didn't like, and he preferred watching *Countdown* on his own anyway" (p. 141).

It is during these afternoon visits that Will begins to surrender himself to a relationship. Giving Marcus, who is often the victim of middle-school cruelty, lessons in pop culture and the art of being cool, Will is given the opportunity to recover his notion of fatherhood, damaged by having been raised by a "batty parent." "The thing was, Will had spent his whole life avoiding real stuff. He was, after all, the son and heir of the man who wrote *Santa's Super Sleigh*. Santa Claus, whose existence most adults had real cause to doubt, bought him everything he wore and ate and drank and sat on and lived in; it could reasonably be argued that reality was not in his genes" (p. 117).

The beauty of the connection is that what Marcus needs is exactly what Will can give: the skills to survive the demands of his daily life. By becoming present to Marcus despite his own initial resistance, Will teaches him something simple but vital: how to be a twelve-year-old boy. And it is this experience that begins the maturing of Will's own heart, preparing him for an encounter with something and someone beyond himself. Rachel is a beautiful, intelligent woman who belongs to a group of friends "who could not control themselves, or protect themselves, people who, if only temporarily, were no longer content to occupy their own space, people who could no longer rely on a new jacket, a bag of grass and an afternoon rerun of *The Rockford Files* to make them complete" (p. 191). Accepting that such substitutes for reality have made him "ugly and monosyllabic", Will slowly begins his entry into this community of real, beautiful, and vulnerable men and women.

*About a Boy* is a story about two boys: a man who still behaves like a boy and a boy who grew up

HUMANUM, Fall 2011, THE CHILD

too soon. Each liberates the other. But both “had to lose things in order to gain other things. Will had lost his shell and his cool and his distance, and he felt scared and vulnerable, but he got to be with Rachel... and Marcus had lost himself, and got to walk home from school with his shoes on” (p. 306). It is about how to be a boy, and how to begin to be a father.

***Julie E. Heldt completed a Masters of Theological Studies at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. She currently lives in Houston.***