

Cheating Fate, Audrey Pfitzenmaier

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Review by Ann Ketcheson

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Four teens — Cassidy, Jeremy, Kyle and Sukh — have grown up together in a small town in the BC interior and have been best friends since kindergarten. They are involved in a serious snowmobile accident and are lucky to survive. But all of them have vague and frightening memories from the time of the accident, including lists of names. These names argent anyone they know, and yet all four teens saw the same names. Could these be people who died at the time of their accident? Or who will die when they do in the future? The teens begin to wonder if they are fated to die together at some predestined time. It seems the only logical way to avoid this possible disaster is to never again all be in the same place at the same time. They draw lots, deciding to pair up and always keep separate from the other pair. Oddly enough, after a series of exciting and unforeseen adventures, the four do end up together at the end of the book.

Pfitzenmaier grabs readers right from the opening page with a vivid description of the snowmobile accident and the rescue of the teenagers. Within this account are flashbacks for each main character which show readers just how interconnected their lives are. As life returns to normal, Pfitzenmaier uses text messages among the friends, a technique which quickly moves the plot along as well as being typical of their age group.

Pfitzenmaier's descriptions make each character memorable and distinct; this is not a four-person "blob." Jeremy deals with his divorced father's new girlfriend and an eventual disastrous move to live with his mother in Vancouver. Kyle pursues his motocross dreams and is clearly the daredevil of the group, testing fate in many ways. Sukh, who is Indo-Canadian, also ends up in Vancouver for a time and is involved with cousins who are in trouble with the law. Cassidy is just happy to hang out with her friends, although she worries about some of the boys' antics. Pfitzenmaier has invented characters who are very realistic and whose friendship and willingness to be there for one another will ring true with teen readers. Through each character, various subplots are delicately woven into the book.

Pfitzenmaier also considers the question of near death experiences. Do they really happen? Just how seriously should we take them? The teens feel they are destined to die together which raises interesting discussions and feelings among them about religion and beliefs. Do they tempt fate by staying together as a group? Is there any

way for human beings to actually cheat fate? Is giving up their friendship worth the chance of cheating fate?

Cheating Fate is a compelling book for young adult readers. Adults complement the main characters and add to the plot, but it is the teen friends who are the focus. They go through some typical struggles with school and romance, but this novel digs deeper than that and touches on mortality, spirituality and the importance of friendship in effective and thought-provoking ways. Keep a copy – or more! – on library or classroom shelves as this is bound to be a hit with teen readers.

Highly Recommended.

Ann Ketcheson, a retired teacher-librarian and former teacher of high school English and French, lives in Ottawa, ON, where she has turned her love of travel into a second career as a travel consultant.



Kirkus Reviews

In a (literally) heart-stopping first chapter, four teens, best friends since early childhood, fall through the ice of a Canadian lake and are rescued. Later, comparing notes on their near-death experience, they all recollect seeing a page with names inscribed on it: those set to die on that day—without their own names—and also a page from some future date on which they will all perish together. Convinced they can cheat fate by never being together in one place again, they split into two pairs. Without their mutual support and guidance, and convinced that if they stay apart they cannot die, the three boys engage in risky behavior: using and selling drugs, fast driving and casual sexual encounters. The sole girl, cut off from the boy she now realizes she loves, is miserable. But their lives seem inexplicably linked, and they are drawn back together with many unforeseen consequences. Can anyone really cheat fate? Although the rest isn't as good as that riveting first chapter, it's still a worthwhile read. (*Fiction. 12 & up*)



Resource Links, Vol 14, Number 1

Four best-friend teens survive drowning in a snowmobile mishap but can't shake the vision of their names among a group on a glowing page. Believing that the page signifies their deaths and that they will die together, they reluctantly break up their long-time friendship and life slowly begins to unravel for them all as they face a myriad of problems.

Cassidy and Jeremy can't quite bring themselves to admit that they're in love so each enters dead-end relationships with others. Jeremy eventually goes to Vancouver to live with his mother to escape his father's new live-in girlfriend, who disgusts him. Kyle copes by reckless motocross driving while Sukh joins his west-coast cousins in drug dealing. Assaulted by his mother's partner, Jeremy ends up drugged and drunk at the

same hospital as Sukh who has been shot by competing drug dealers. Cassidy accompanies Kyle to the same hospital when his fearless driving leaves him with broken bones. All the boys survive but the group ends up on the same small plane heading back home to the Cariboods. When Cassidy realizes that the flight attendant's and the co-pilot's names could be ones on the envisioned page, she calmly accepts God's will for her life.

The religious overtones of this novel will restrict its success to a small group of devout teens who are comfortable with everyday discussions about faith and God, and the implication that immorality will lead to unhappiness and death. Other readers will be overwhelmed with the idiocy of the boys, who, despite the nurturing love of the adults around them, and the fundamental strength of their friendship, make and re-enforce stupid choices that nearly destroy them. Sukh's sudden descent into drug taking is unexplained as it is difficult to imagine that his cousins exerted that much peer pressure from afar. Why doesn't Jeremy turn to his beloved Oma and Opa Lockett for help when he can't cope with the lewd sexuality of his father's girlfriend? Why do these fast friends allow each other to self-destruct? Cassidy and Jeremy's relationship, on the other hand, is believable. What is incredible is how unprepared they are for sex, both in terms of birth control and the actual sexual experience.

Much of the group's background is covered by the flashbacks experienced by the teens while they are drowning. The group chats online using shorthand that will date the novel, but none of them text each other, the more current form of teen communication. Small town Cariboo life and the outdoor forest are described in loving detail. The drug dealing scenes are grim and authentic. It's unlikely that mainstream teens will buy into the religious message of this book, but evangelical schools may find it to be a useful cautionary tale. — Joan Marshall,

Thematic Links: Religious Beliefs; Drugs; Relationships



What If? Magazine

If I were to watch the author write this story, and there was no such thing as a computer, she would be holding her feathered pen delicately in her hand, each stroke of the four characters' lives cautiously thought out. Dainty comes to mind, but more of a carefully Grafted storyline in general.

You follow the roller coaster ride that four "Miracle Teens" take after their near-death experience, and the startling conclusion they draw. There's Sukh, who gets in with the wrong crowd at the wrong time; Kyle, a daredevil crossed with dangerous ambition, and Jeremy the quiet one who just wants to find himself and find love. Last, there's Cassidy, the only girl in the tight-knit, best-friends-since-kindergarten group, who loves the boys more than life itself, quite literally. This story is one of discovering your own beliefs and testing the unknown idea of fate, destiny, and the greater plan, the greater Being out there. Right from the start you are thrown into this craftily woven tale of suspense, falling in love with the characters,

cringing, crying, and laughing with them. The emotions portrayed are realistic and gritty, giving you a chance to read right into the characters' heads.

The one major flaw I found while reading this book was that everything moved so quickly, and the point of view jumped erratically. It was never just this page is Jeremy, that page Sukh. Everything moved very quickly and was occasionally hard to follow-as well, the dialogue was slightly difficult to believe (too much description in between). However, in the end this book held a very precious story inside its covers. And the characters, were they ever truly cheating fate? Pick up this snappy novel to find out the end result. — Kelly Gerlings

