

Child Play Mates

Susan J. Young

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Combining explicit sexual scenes with elements of a murder mystery, Child Play Mates works to shock its audience.

Susan J. Young's *Child Play Mates* reunites old friends in a winding tale of betrayal, murder, and sexual revenge.

Robin and David were partners in crime in childhood, but lost touch after school. When David returns home to visit his parents, he and Robin discover that they still share things in common, including a severe sense of sexual ennui. David decides to take Robin under his domination-inclined wing; their relationship abruptly shifts. When David's wife ends up dead, he and Robin find that they must also contend with the suspicions of outsiders if their relationship stands a chance.

The central relationship progresses quickly. David moves from wanting to make Robin's body "feel like heaven" to violently spanking her over childhood transgressions in the course of one date. The initial absence of Robin's consent in the situation, which is sold in dom/sub terms, is glaring.

The narrative itself strains believability, effecting movement with plane crashes and car accidents. Abrupt transitions, mechanical sentence structures, and meandering plot developments further muddle the novel, which comes to feel inauthentic, particularly once it becomes half a murder mystery. The book is most centered during sex scenes.

Character development is sparse and alienating. Cast players are given full names and titles, but aren't further fleshed out. David's troublesome wife is conveniently dispatched. A long list of sexual partners and participants in the "erotic lifestyle" appears midway, with extended quips related to their real-world places of business, but its characters have no presence in the text otherwise.

David dominates the text, but not sympathetically. He narrates sexual encounters until they are rote, stripped of all surprises in advance; his actions are frequently at odds with the text's declaration that he is "good." The suggestion that he is a victim of his dead wife's "plan to cover her lesbian lifestyle" leads off a foray into offensive anti-LGBT commentary, which plays awkwardly against simultaneous misrepresentations of the BDSM community.

Awkward sex scenes shift away from David and Robin as the murder investigation intensifies. They continually strain for shock value, but their progressions veer toward discomfiting violence. Terms like "seat spot" and "fanny" come across as puritanical, and are particularly off-putting in their explicit contexts. Some encounters read more like sets of instructions for sex and torture acts than they do as erotica.

A detail-oriented, omniscient narrator muses about character motivations, though with less focus than is given to describing settings, seasons, menus, and even caskets precisely; such minutiae tends to push the story off track, and the revelation of the novel's killer gets buried in the mix. Frequent grammatical missteps and errant punctuation make for slow reading.

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MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (December 7, 2016)

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