

More than a Hashtag

Penny Poulsen Watson

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*Set in the shadowy Louisiana bayous, the coming-of-age novel *More than a Hashtag* celebrates a boy's perseverance through danger and loss.*

Rich with imagery and Cajun expressions, Penny Poulsen Watson's coming-of-age novel *More than a Hashtag* follows a boy who is determined to uncover the truth no matter the cost.

Tee and his best friend Chilly are used to danger. They've spent years exploring the alligator-ridden Louisiana bayous and navigating the hazardous world of adolescence. But when they begin investigating the shadowy business entangling Chilly's brother, Pinkie, they are thrust into a far more dangerous world of drugs and deception.

The story starts off slow, mirroring the long summer days that Tee and Chilly spend fishing and exploring. As the boys are drawn deeper into danger, though, the story picks up, crescendoing toward violence (though still leaving room for contemplative moments). It slows again as Tee deals with a tragic loss.

Tee's voice is poignant, equal parts hilarious and heartbreaking. He comments on how confusing it is to be "almost men" and how complicated first crushes can be; he reflects on the differences between fear and being afraid. Even when he faces threats and tragedies, he clings to his appreciation for the simple joys of life: the taste of a fried bologna sandwich, the excitement of catching a fish. And his narration is filled with Cajun culture and expressions (all clarified in the book's helpful glossary).

Strong adult role models are central to the story. They are presented as flawed but redeemable: Tee's mother and grandmother are strict and sometimes impatient but loving. Tee's grandfather confronts his past prejudice to reconnect with his grandson. And Tee's intimidating neighbor Miz Johnson becomes one of his closest friends. She encourages his dream of becoming a famous writer, though this important subplot is eclipsed by others.

Symbolism abounds in the book's detailed scenes, giving voice to feelings Tee cannot yet express. Murky and shadowed, the bayous are an appropriate setting for the illegal activity that Tee and Chilly uncover. And the mysterious rougarou monster, rumored to roam the bayou during a full moon, mirrors Tee's fears of losing loved ones and his confrontation with human nature's dark side. He confronts this fear to satisfying effect in the book's final pages. However, the book also leaves several issues unresolved, as with the identity of the people in the mysterious card Tee finds in the attic and Pinkie's relationship with his girlfriend, Emma.

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VIVIAN TURNBULL (September 5, 2023)

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