



One and One Is One

S. T. Byra

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One and One Is One is an unsettling, deterministic story in which a boy suffers cruelty but displays resilience.

In S. T. Byra's dark coming-of-age tale *One and One Is One*, a boy proves his talent for survival.

Eight-year-old Grady and his parents live on an army base in England. His childhood is marked by bullying and hazing from classmates who resent his perceived betrayal of one of their own. Grady endures brutality, but at his request, his parents keep their intervention to a minimum.

Grady proves to be a resourceful, preternatural child. He renounces God, and resolves to preserve himself. As his personal trials solidify his self-reliance, he comes to embody pioneering courage and a stiff upper lip. His character is unusual, if seldom defined by more than his circumstances.

In the second part of the book, Grady is sixteen. An accident leaves him orphaned. He's sent to Chicago to live with his aunt, who is an abusive Christian fundamentalist. After less than an hour in her presence—a span that makes her character's extreme reaction to him abrupt—Grady is removed, and soon placed with new foster parents, English expats Andy and Hilde Burghley. They're thoughtful people whose struggle to earn Grady's trust is poignant.

Scenes between the Burghleys and Grady are lighter in the story and take greater care with surrounding details, from Grady's introduction to Chicago's culinary highlights to the warmth of his new home. Just as Grady begins piecing together a future, though, he's struck by a loss that echoes an earlier one; the uncanny parallel undermines his tentative healing.

Events are introduced at an uneven pace. The logistics of getting Grady from England to America slow the story; once he arrives, there's little room for him to express his grief before new dilemmas unfold. In a whirlwind of traumas following traumas, characters become black-and-white figures, including Grady's aunt, whose swift characterization through intense dialogue leaves no room to explore the origins of her fanaticism. Her religion and her view of Grady's mother and Grady complicate, rather than enrich, the work. Grady's development is oblique; though he starts to open up with the Burghleys, and to allow himself greater vulnerability, he ends in the same state of solitude in which he began.

Relentless surprises—from a hospital stay to a court appearance—keep the focus on the distressing forces that befall Grady. The prose emphasizes actions over atmosphere or character reflections. Dialogue that overexplains elements of the plot keeps emotions and reactions close to the surface. Grammatical errors detract from the otherwise sharp typography and polished design.

One and One Is One is an unsettling, deterministic story. As he faces the cruelty of others, Grady's resilience is heartbreaking.

KAREN RIGBY (June 12, 2019)

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