

The King of Escape

Mark Christopher Mathis

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The King of Escape is a thoughtful story about growing up and letting go of past mistakes.

In Mark Christopher Mathis's powerful young adult novel, *The King of Escape*, a young man copes with loss, pain, and guilt.

Nicholas is a seventeen-year-old addict. After several stints in rehab, a year of house arrest, and his father's suicide, his mother decides to take the family on a cruise, hoping for a fresh start. Though Nicholas has no interest in taking a vacation with his family, the trip has a profound effect on his family and on his sense of self-worth.

Each member of Nicholas's family is struggling, and each suffers alone. His mother, Julie, works through single motherhood with three challenging children. Nicholas resists her and connects instead to his brother, Jacob, who is autistic. Their sister, Madeline, resents Nicholas and blames him for the family's troubles. Each family member is a complex piece of the family puzzle. Their interactions and dialogue are authentic for a family that is falling apart.

The story follows Nicholas as he explores the cruise ship, and most of his activities on board are mundane. He meets a girl named Jillian, who is beautiful and kind and sees the good in Nicholas when no one else seems to. He spends much of his time with her, relaxing by the pool, watching over his brother, and eating in the ship's restaurants. When he is not with Jillian, though, Nicholas spends time trying to access pills, drinking abandoned and half consumed drinks, and getting lost in the oblivion of the Internet.

Slow paced and light on action, the story focuses on Nicholas's emotional well being and relationships. Much of the text is given to his thoughts, memories, and dreams. His emotions are raw and honest; they make the book compelling. Even when Nicholas is at his worst, it is impossible not to root for him. His suffering is immense, and no one dislikes Nicholas as much as he hates himself.

The book ends with a sense of hope. Nicholas ultimately learns that he cannot truly escape his problems, but that he may be able to let go of some of his self-loathing. As the family departs the ship, they seem far better connected to one another than they were at the beginning of the story.

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CATHERINE THURESON (October 10, 2018)

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