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Defending Jacob, by William Landay, Random House, 2012

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Recommended Readings



Defending Jacob

by William Landay, Random House, 2012

Reviewed by Larry Riggs

This is the third book by Landay, a former prosecutor. It's the first one I've read, and it is good enough to motivate me to read the other two. The book is legally and psychologically complex and convincing. Jacob is the fourteen-year-old son of Andy Barber, an assistant district attorney and head prosecutor. When one of Jacob's classmates is found murdered, Andy, as chief prosecutor, is in charge of the investigation. Andy's longtime underling and protégé points out that, since the victim is connected to Andy's son, Andy's role may become ethically questionable. The protégé has a point, but he is also voraciously ambitious and, Andy assumes, after Andy's job. When suspicion focuses on Jacob, Andy is taken off the case, and his expertise as a prosecutor complicates his role as a father. As the plot unfolds, we are never sure whether Andy is right to be certain of Jacob's innocence, or in denial. Through legal maneuvering, psychiatric evaluation of Jacob, increasing tension between Andy and his wife, and a very intense trial, our ambivalence about Andy and Jacob grows. Landay regularly suspends the narrative and gives us excerpts from a grand jury proceeding in which Andy is being questioned by his former protégé. We are not sure just what is at issue before the grand jury and how it is related to Jacob's case. Landay's technique works very well; it heightens the tension while preserving the ambiguity. This is a good read with interesting real-life implications and a shattering ending.

- Larry Riggs is Professor of French at Butler University.