

Contemporary Book Reviews

The Essence of Nathan Biddle
by J. William Lewis
Greenleaf

rev. by Cara Musashi

J. William Lewis is an author from Mobile, Alabama, now living in a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama, whose desire to write began after editing his college's literary magazine—of which he also submitted to—and won the Merihl Award. He graduated from Spring Hill College, magna cum laude in English and Philosophy, though he later decided to become a lawyer rather than a writer. Lewis went to law school at the University of Virginia and was a lawyer for approximately thirty-five years before he “hung up his shingle” and returned to writing. He completed *The Essence of Nathan Biddle* in 2020, and the novel was later published on June 1st, 2021. Lewis is now the CEO of an investment company, but says he continues to write when time permits.

The Essence of Nathan Biddle follows the life of prep school senior Kit Biddle, whose life is surrounded by “a web of spiritual quandaries and intellectual absurdities” after his cousin Nathan was murdered by his uncle under the guise of “direct orders from God.” We follow Kit in his everyday endeavors ranging from interactions with classmates and friends, as well as his family. Kit is said to be intelligent—however plagued by existential questions about life—which, when paired with the struggles of an adolescent learning his place in the world, leads him to spiral down a dark and dreary path of self-distraction. His grades are sub-par, and his performance in extracurricular activities is lacking, despite his known talent for running. An irrational decision to steal a truck and speed down a highway lands him in the hospital, forcing him to re-examine his perceptions of the world.

Although Kit's life is—without a doubt—extremely chaotic, perhaps far different than what an average adolescent would ever have to deal with, Lewis still manages to weave a story that is somehow still relatable. Kit is a young boy who's learning to deal with feeling love and affection towards others beyond that of his family, learning how to manage work and school on top of the restrictions he and his mother have as one of the less well-off families in the town. He

finds relief through writing poetry and has a close connection to his English teacher; Mr. Marcus, who often privately reads the poems Kit sends him. As the following segment shows, Mr. Marcus also tries to warn Kit about what the future looks like:

“You’re in no clubs. You’ve rejected the *Pierian* staff. I understand from Coach Kern that you’re a track star who refuses to perform, so you may not even have athletics going for you. It’s your life and you can do with it as you see fit, but you need to be prepared for the consequences. Your peers are going to go on. If you aren’t careful, you’ll be left behind.”

In a fashion typical for a teenager, Kit deflects the notion by questioning his words, although he shows an internal feeling of anxiety towards the matter. Perhaps exceedingly similar to what many readers have felt at one point in their lives, the fear of what our futures hold and being left behind is truly a plague to us all.

While it may not be a centralized theme of the novel, his experiences as a student athlete also leaves something to be touched on. As previously mentioned, Kit is said to be a track star, who’s performing poorly. His coach isn’t so pleased with him, and Kit expresses a dread when it comes to speaking to him about it, as follows:

“One of the reasons I had dreaded talking to him was that I didn’t know what I wanted to do about track. I enjoyed running when I was in the mood, but I wasn’t usually in the mood at three-thirty in the afternoon when the coach scheduled the practices.”

“... I was trying to tell him that I didn’t have time for track or rather I didn’t want a lot of trainings when he wanted me to do it. If I spend my mornings in class and my afternoons training and my nights getting ready for the next morning’s classes, I don’t have time for anything else.”

As a former student athlete whose season was cut short after conflicts similar to Kit’s, it made his story feel much more personal, and much

more relatable. Many people don't understand the immense stress put on student athletes, and even more coaches don't understand how to appropriately help their athletes when things start affecting them.

After the accident leaves Kit bedridden and potentially unable to run again, he comes into contact with a psychiatrist by the name of Dr. Gross. Although initially apprehensive of the man, Kit finds that meeting with the doctor forces him to focus on one thing at a time, slowly but surely coming to terms with the miasma of things looming over him. The situation progresses in a pleasing release of darkness as Kit's despair lightens. He eventually realizes that while he may never know the answer as to "why or who" he is, he knows "where" he is, insinuating that while we may not know explicitly about our past or future, we *do* know our present. From start to finish, *The Essence of Nathaniel Biddle* is a wonderfully written tale of self-discovery, coming of age, and an everlasting, profound narration that leaves readers pondering the depth of the pages long after being read.