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Another bucolic fall in northern New Hampshire, and the semester is under way at Bishop's Hill Academy. But this year the start of school has been less than tranquil. The new headmaster, Jim Hawthorne, has liberal ideas that the staff find far from welcome. He's also determined to do something about the long "tradition" of permanent loans to faculty of shovels, saws, even cars, from the school's supplies. Eloquent as he is on the subject of honor, rumor has it he's only taken this job to escape his past. And Hawthorne isn't the only uneasy newcomer. There's Jessica, a former stripper at fifteen, and Frank LeBrun, a replacement cook who's a bit too quick with a dirty joke. All three have secrets to conceal, memories to suppress.

Serene on the surface, the ivy-clad, tree-lined campus gives few clues to the school's history of special privileges, petty corruptions, and hidden allegiances. But as autumn advances, the affable smiles and pretenses of virtue wear thin. And as winter closes in, students, teachers, and staff get an education in savagery and murder.

Boy in the Water Details

Date : Published July 15th 2000 by St. Martin's Paperbacks (first published 1999)

ISBN : 9780312975227

Author : Stephen Dobyns

Format : Mass Market Paperback 448 pages

Genre : Mystery, Fiction, Thriller, Horror, Suspense, Mystery Thriller

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From Reader Review Boy in the Water for online ebook

Snotchocheez says

2.5 stars

I've for quite a long time kept Stephen Dobyns' name filed away as someone to try, after fellow suspense writer (and fellow Stephen) King lauded Dobyns' *The Church of Dead Girls* in King's Entertainment Weekly article. That title wasn't available at the library but *Boy In The Water* was.

The set-up was really well done. A prologue introduces the titular boy floating dead in a swimming pool, then gives us a glimpse into the lives of a really creepy, joke telling assassin-for-hire, then an underage stripper, then our protagonist, clinical psychologist Dr. Jim Hawthorne, who's trying to rebuild his life after losing his wife and daughter in a fire in San Diego (that he feels responsible for) and takes a badly underpaid, thankless job as headmaster for a failing reform/boarding school across the country in New Hampshire. We learn that Dr. Hawthorne's got his work cut out for him, with plenty of jealous dissension of the other teachers, a board of trustees that is rumored to be closing the school soon, whilst contending with his own personal demons.

I was riveted throughout much of the first half of this, trying to figure out where Dobyns was going with this thing. Creepy lurid thriller? Ghost-y old-school goings-on? A psychological examination into greed and malfeasance? All-of-the-above, most likely, but my attention really started waning at about the midpoint, when it became painfully clear Dobyns had no idea how to end this thing. A book that was already feeling a little bloated (not unlike the condition of boy's body floating in the school's natatorium) really started getting stinky when Dobyns kept having his protagonist Dr. Hawthorne present the same facts over and over again (perhaps to wring every drop from the suspense dishrag). All I know is, what started out an engaging and interesting thriller began boring me with every repetition of Dr. Hawthorne's actions, with every reiteration of a factoid. Oh yeah, and that ending...yikes.

Yet, there was enough good stuff here to keep me entertained throughout much of it. The premise was somewhat original, and I was a bit creeped out at times. While I didn't love this, I will definitely try one of Dobyns' (well over a dozen) other titles in the future.

Jonathan Briggs says

If this were a just world, Stephen Dobyns' "The Church of Dead Girls" would enjoy the critical and popular acclaim accorded to "The Silence of the Lambs," while "Lambs" would be a moderately successful potboiler that reaped modest rewards for the moderately talented Thomas Harris. If you like the psychological thrillers, you need to get to "Church." Unfortunately, Dobyns' followup, "Boy in the Water," isn't nearly as accomplished or skillful. We get off to a grand start: a dead boy floating facedown in a high school swimming pool, a terrified kitten stranded on his back. Flashback to Jim Hawthorne (Hawthorne, there's a good Gothic name), recovering from a tragic fire that took his family and starting a new job as headmaster of Bishop's Hill Academy in New Hampshire. Gargoyle-festooned Bishop's Hill is a school on "the cutting edge of failure," a dumping ground for kids and teachers trying to serve out the rest of their sentences without learning anything. The students would be in jail if they didn't have rich parents, and the faculty would be unemployed if they didn't have do-nothing posts at the school. Hawthorne has ambitious plans: Mandatory

staff meetings! Rap sessions with the kids! He's determined to save 15-year-old Jessica Weaver, who puts the student body in student body by stripping at nudie bars to raise money to kidnap her younger brother from her sneeringly evil stepfather. Hawthorne hopes to coax the school's timid, gay psychiatrist, Clifford Eving, out of his office, so he'll engage with the students instead of reading novels all day under the glowering portrait of 19th-century headmaster Ambrose Stark (another great Gothic name!), "the spirit of the place, as it were." Hawthorne aims to rehabilitate the school and in the process rehabilitate himself, not reckoning that most folks are fine with the status quo. The harassment campaign against him starts off slow, then escalates: vandalism, sacks of rotten food, ghostly sightings of Ambrose Stark, crank phone calls from Hawthorne's dead wife. All leading up to ... MURDER! None of this is even remotely believable. It's more like one of those quirkfest TV shows, say "Twin Peaks" or "The Kingdom." It's not much of a whodunit coz pretty much everyone is guilty. The teachers are all petty, vindictive and malicious. To say nothing of the hyperactive icepick psycho killer who works in the kitchen, telling lousy "Canuck" jokes and baking tacks into the bread. ("He made good bread.") Dobyns continues to add level upon level to his layer cake of ludicrous. And Hawthorne is such a milquetoast, touchy-feely twigboy that it's hard to root for him as a hero, even during his "High Noon" moment when a blizzard hits and knocks out power to Bishop's Hill while a killer is on the loose. Oh, did I mention the spiked fence around the belltower? I think we know where this is goin. All the cover blurbage suggests this is a pulse-pounding thriller, but it's really not. It's much too slow and meandering and atmospheric to take to the beach. It's more of a modern spin on (or perhaps a parody of) the old-fashioned Gothic, complete with moaning winds, howls in the wilderness and eerie apparitions. And as such, it could be effective if read while curled up on the couch on a deathly quiet winter nite after a good snowfall.

J.M. says

I didn't like this book and couldn't finish it.

Punit Sahani says

A better end for Hawthorne's sake. After all that bone breaking run around and psychological turmoil and abrupt ending does not leave me happy. There should have been an end to the evil father too, Jessica to get back to her senses, Bishop's hill seeing a new sun and much more.

Georgina says

Poor Dobyns - on the back of my edition, Time Out is quoted...."Stephen King with a PhD. Knowing I am a fan of SK, this book was suggested to me and I looked forward to a stonking good read. I can only think that the Time Out reviewer has never read a Stephen King book, or he would know that whilst Dobyns seems to be a competent thriller writer, he doesn't, on this showing, have the skills in characterisation and mood building, of narrative drive and suspense building, that SK can wield before breakfast. From reading other reviews it seems that this is not his best work and it was good enough for me to try another if I come across one, but I wouldn't go looking....

Of this particular text, there aren't many surprises, and there isn't anyone to care deeply about - the main

protagonists are stock characters - the flawed goodies and the baddies with redeeming features, and the chorus line of shallow cowards whose egos are greater than their abilities. Our hero is rather colourless and driven by an event that reads as far-fetched in its complexity. A simple fire and a bit of guilt would have sufficed, but rings driven into door frames seem ridiculous and diminish the verisimilitude that pins my heart to a story. The narrative is driven by responses that are too grand for the hackneyed seeds of their birth. Can you really go from being a medium sized fish in a small pond in the middle of nowhere, to being a Machiavellian of outrageous greed and callousness, and be able to drag innocuous fellows along with you? Where SK can depict levels of evil that surprise even those who succumb to them, Dobyns asks us to believe that unexceptional people can be driven, by what is basically greed (a greed focussed on a modest outcome, we're not talking Bugatti and Bahamas here), to be egregiously ghastly. I am well aware that ordinary people can do awful things, but not for these paltry reasons. And the end, oh the end - no spoilers, but Yawn! Seen it too many times....yawn, yawn, yawn.

John Porter says

Well written, but oddly uninvolving.

Courtney says

Thriller that takes place at a prep school for troubled children. Too much focus on developing certain characters and not enough on others. Interesting, but was able to figure it out midway through the book.

Lobstergirl says

I almost stopped reading near the beginning of the book because there was an unpleasantly graphic scene at a strip club, followed by a scene where one low class thug kills another low class thug with an icepick. Neither seemed to have any connection to the promised locus, a New Hampshire prep school for troubled youth. But I stuck with it and I'm glad I did, since Dobyns' writing is many notches above your average thriller fare. As with The Church of Dead Girls, he creates a very sympathetic protagonist. Jim Hawthorne is a psychologist whose wife and daughter were killed in a fire set by a juvenile delinquent he had been trying to help. He comes east to take a job as headmaster of a boarding school for problem kids, partly because he thinks he can help them, partly to punish himself for not being able to save his family. He begins changing the school for the better, but most faculty and staff are resentful of the changes and begin passive-aggressively plotting against him. The school turns out to be a rather sick nest of vipers. At about the one-quarter point, I couldn't put the book down and read through to the end, stopping only to prepare snacks and admire myself in the mirror, as is my wont.

Mary Mortimer says

This thriller has it all. The drama, murder, and suspense. It's like Dobyns took the game Clue and turned it into a book. Excellent read although I felt at times that there was too much going on. At times I would find

myself confused with which characters were on which side. The biggest thing that bothered me about this book was the title. It does the novel no justice. It would be like someone writing a book about a circus and then naming the book Monkeys.

Paula says

I really liked this book; plenty of twists and turns, no loose threads, and best of all the characters jump off the page.

Chana says

Mystery/thriller set in an isolated boarding school in the New Hampshire forest. The setting lends itself to creepiness and criminal activity, especially with the staff of hostile and homicidal staff that work at the school. Enter Dr. Hawthorne, the new Headmaster, a well-meaning, clueless but ultimately heroic man burdened with guilt and grief after the deaths of his wife and daughter in a fire. The most interesting character is the bad guy, which is not that unusual for this type of book. If I could have chosen where to be in this book I probably would have been sitting in the history class learning about Marcus Aurelius.

Kelly says

Scooby-Dooby-Doo, Where Are You? We got some work to do now. Oh wait, you mean this isn't a new episode about that meddling gang from Mystery, Inc and their dog? Well damn, I must have been absent the day that memo was handed out because what we have here kiddies is a true-blue suspense story that must have leaked out from the cartoon network. Crazy, supernatural pranks – check. Murder mystery that unravels as the characters literally stumble upon clues –check. Players that have absolutely no common sense, courage, or emotion – check. Hey Mr. Dobyns, Hanna-Barbera called, they want their storyline back.

I don't know if it was the author, editor, or some one in the publicity office that came up with the title, but I was pissed as hell that I waited the whole book for a title that had little to nothing to do with the story to explain itself.

The outline of the story is a basic who-done-it, which evolves into a redemption mystery that carries a message and a supernatural touch. As it stood the only mystery that existed was the actual point of the story. The arrangement of the events, the clueless players, and the hair-raising predicaments are amateurish at best. The plot is mosaic and redundant from the first chapter to the last. Had it been trimmed and the plot and sub-plots defined it would have turned out to be a different, but much better book. Also, the end debunks any chance that mystery could be involved, which sealed the deal that this tale is a grown-up version of Saturday morning cartoons. Jinkies!

Dobyn's style of writing is tedious, chaotic, and completely devoid of any structure. Instead of focusing on one, maybe two viewpoints, he has decided to use over ten that rotate from the new headmaster, an underage ex-stripper new to the school, a cook with a past, a complete faculty, a few students, and a homicide detective. How's that feel, does it hurt? Also, he details everything five times over just in case we didn't get it in the last chapter or he didn't point it out loud enough. Had he paid half as much attention to the speed as

he did to description, it might have at least been quick. He didn't, and it wasn't. Drawn out to the point of exhaustion, the pace taxes both your mind and patience. The events are scarce, and the build-up leading up to them is frenzied.

Now if that wasn't annoying enough, let's talk about the characters. One-dimensional, emotionally detached, and about as sincere as a used car salesman, Dobyns introduces a large cast for no other reason than to fill space. Take the main character, the new headmaster, Jim Hawthorne. Early on we learn that he lost his wife and daughter in a fire due to a patient's attachment issues and then we are reminded of said incident in every chapter that follows. Where was he and what was he doing? He was receiving a Lewinsky in the parking lot compliments of an old student. Enter an assumption of guilt, remorse, and the need to be punished. Let me repeat that, he NEVER shows any emotion. Also, in order to atone for his past indiscretions and his failure as both a husband and father he decides a job at a school that is beneath accreditation is just the ticket. As for the atmosphere, I'm still looking for it.

My rating? I give it a 1. Get a clue, avoid this book!

-As reviewed for Horror-Web.com

Debbie says

Dobyns does a good job of setting up your anxious anticipation and characters that appear simply black and white, but have another dimension, if probed. I had actually read this before but still couldn't remember quite who was involved in what and that there were several "whats" going on. In our mystery discussion group, several people felt that the new headmaster was dense and a poor psychologist, but who expects to be dropped in such a toxic environment? And who could clean it up in 12 weeks, the length of time covered in the book?

Cynthia says

I read *The Church of Dead Girls* about 20 years ago and I remember liking it. Stephen Dobyns' name made an indelible impression in my memory. I was exposed to some of his poetry about a year ago and I was incredibly impressed. I deliberately sought more of his work and, sadly, this is what I stumbled upon. It is not the best example of what he is capable of, in my opinion. If not for his rich, descriptive vocabulary, which I fully appreciate, I would have given this book just one star. I thought it was incredibly boring. I didn't find it remotely intriguing until I was about 250 pages into it, which isn't the type of impression a suspense thriller should make. And while we are on the suspense topic, I want to mention that I never felt this book was remotely suspenseful. The outcome was relatively predictable. You know who the antagonists are from the start. Because I am sure that the author has some better work out there, I won't abandon his books all together, but I definitely wouldn't recommend this particular one to a friend.

Julie says

Boy in the Water by Stephen Dobyns is a 2000 St. Martin's Press publication.

Jim Hawthorne accepts the job of headmaster of Bishop's Hill Academy, a school that is going through some hard times. Hawthorne is overqualified for the job, but he has his reasons for taking the position.

However, the staff, faculty, and students are less than pleased with his arrival and he soon finds himself the victim of some ghoulish pranks. But, when a student is found dead, Hawthorne and Bishop's Hill Academy are left hanging by a thread.

My first introduction to Stephen Dobyns was with 'The Church of Dead Girls'. The book was so good, I read it twice. The next book I read was 'The Burn Place' which was also very good.

So, when I saw this book at the annual 'Friends of the Library' sale, a few years back, I snapped it up. But, the book got shoved to the back of my bookshelf and over time I forgot about it, until I recently got into one of my rearranging moods and found it again.

Although the book has received some mixed reviews, and I do understand this one doesn't even come close to TCODG, it does have some atmospheric creepiness and a sinister quality to it that kept me interested, even though the pacing isn't terribly swift.

This book is just a tiny bit dated in places, and beware, there are a few words tossed in we wouldn't dream of using today, but overall there is something about setting the story in an old school where the students all come from troubled backgrounds, that raises the level of suspense.

The story pulled me in right away, and I did get caught up in the cat and mouse game being played with Hawthorne, but it started to lose its cohesiveness around the midway mark, and never fully recovered.

This author has done much better work, and this one was a little disappointing, but it wasn't all that bad either. So, it falls into that middle of the road category.

I haven't heard much from this author is a while, but I understand he writes the 'Charlie Bradshaw' series, which I have never read, so I may look into those sometime soon.

Overall this one gets 3 stars
