



We Used to Be Kings

Stewart Foster

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Six years ago Tom's brother died. The next day he came back.

It's Tom and Jack's 18th birthday, but it isn't a cause for celebration. For the past three years they've been in a care home for troubled children, a place where Dr Smith tries to silence the voice of Jack in Tom's head. But Tom doesn't want that. He's already lost his brother once, he's not going to lose him again.

And so, when they go in front of the review board, they will have to pretend Jack has gone so they won't be sent to the Young Men's Institution or they'll have to escape. Because one way or another they've got to get out of this place. They've got to be free, they've got to remember everything that happened to them, to their mum, and to their dad. They have to find their dad, whom they haven't seen since he left on a space mission to the moon when they were young.

We Used To Be Kings is the story of a young boy's descent into madness following the loss of everything he knows. Set in the 1970s, it is reminiscent of unusually hot summers, pictures of Russians in space and war on our doorstep. It's an audacious, at times hilarious story that is ultimately heartbreakingly unforgettable.

We Used to Be Kings Details

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Author : Stewart Foster

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From Reader Review We Used to Be Kings for online ebook

Laura Boakes says

10/10 : I found this book both heartbreakin & empowering. It follows the mental health struggles of a teenage boy, following the death of his brother, mother & the mysterious secret surrounding the disappearance of his father from his life. This book resonates with me on a deeply personal level, because of the sensitive & intimate portrayal of the internal monologue that so often accompanies mental health struggles, & is so tough to fight against. I urge you to read this book, but be warned, it will break your heart, multiple times over.

Emmi Bee says

There seems to be a surge of fiction that challenges the stigmas associated with mental illness and learning disabilities at the moment. Only recently, The Shock Of The Fall has won the Costa Book Prize for its story of a man suffering with split personalities. Maggot Moon won the Carnegie Prize for it's portrayal of Standish Treadwell, a boy suffering with dyslexia who is entirely misunderstood. And here, in We Used To Be Kings, I hope we have another award winner; for it's tale of brotherly love and mental illness is beautifully and sensitively told.

It took a chapter or two to get used to the writing style. Stewart Foster writes Jack and Tom separately, but as one - interchanging "We" and "I" in the space of a breath, and no speech punctuation to differentiate between what is said and what is told. There are simply italics for Jack's voice. Tom's speech merges with narration which can be a bit confusing at the beginning. However, once in the swing of it, I was completely sucked in. I couldn't put the book down!

Both Jack and Tom's voices were individual and, at the same time, unified. I think Foster's biggest achievement in the two voices was the portrayal of the age gap between the boys - Tom 18, and Jack 10. There are some wonderful moments when Tom swears or has interest in a girl and Jack's naivety tellingly shines through. Tom also has a heartbreakin patience for his younger brother, allowing him temporary control of his body to play with planes and draw.

However, there is a dark underside to this tale, as you remind yourself constantly that however much these two characters appear separate, they are the same. Tom has had a traumatic past of lies and loss, and is, in fact, just days away from electric therapy to remove Jack's voice from his head completely. And, in the end, it is the one thing he fears most, as Tom writes the final chapter of his story.

Overall

There is so much adoration I could pour onto We Used To Be Kings. It was absolutely, 100% excellent and I will be recommending it to everyone I know! READ. THIS. BOOK.

Jo (That book-hoarding geek) says

I bought this book a few months ago, and I've finally gotten round to reading it!

"We used to be kings" is a book entirely based around mental illness. I suppose really, this is what initially attracted me to the book, in the first place. Mental illness, unfortunately, even now, is something that is still swept under the carpet, therefore meaning that many who have a mental illness, are suffering in silence. This book brought me a whole load of emotions. It was funny, happy, at times rather scary but mostly it was incredibly sad. I was almost afraid to get to the end of this book, as for fear of what I might read. This is an unusual book, and the narration is remarkably unique.

I do think the ending was a slight let down, as I was hoping for something with a bit more bite.

The author has written this with such care and poignancy, but alongside that, he has managed to show a young man, in the terrible and frightening grip of a mental illness.

Sissy says

I don't think I've ever read a book that manages to portray such a strong case of mental illness in such a beautiful yet painful way. The author did an amazing job, the book is truly one of a kind for me.

Tom's struggle with his illness (I would say Tom suffers from split personality but being no expert in mental disorders I will just say I'm not sure what Tom's diagnosis is) was illuminating in explaining how his mind worked and how he and Jack functioned together and apart at the same time.

The book was also kind of spooky at times, some scenes really gave me the chills, and those are the scenes when the reader is forcefully reminded that Jack is dead, Jack exists in Tom and how that must look outside of Tom's mind- to the rest of the world. (view spoiler)

But above all it was very touching. Tom's relationship with his little brother is so endearing to read, and how he loved and kept sacrificing himself for Jack was truly heartbreaking. (view spoiler) Tom's journey to understand and acknowledge his mental illness is a difficult one to read but also a very important one, because it shows how mentally ill people were treated back then and how the person himself feels at the time. This book truly puts you in Tom's head and I believe Tom and Jack have this way of changing the reader's view on things such as *how* we think in general and how each person's take on reality differs in small and big ways.

Sally Gander says

It is rare that an author trusts his reader in the way Stewart Foster does in *We Used To Be Kings*. A conventional writer would lead you through the narrative, but here you are allowed into the main character's head and without having his tangled thoughts explained you can come to your own conclusions about him. The trouble in Tom's mind is the constant voice of his dead younger brother, Jack, who is beguilingly innocent and knowing, and it is through their conversations that we learn about their past and the tragedy that sends them on a quest to find their father.

Out of this inner turmoil comes themes of friendship and dependency, hope and fate, but most of all Foster pays back the trust with an utterly convincing portrayal of mental illness, deftly balancing the darkness with laugh-out-loud moments that make the difficulty of their journey all the more poignant.

While this is placed as a novel for adults, it is an important coming-of-age story for teenagers too. A stunningly impressive debut.

Renita D'Silva says

Loved this beautiful, harrowing and very original story about a boy's descent into psychosis as a way of dealing with his brother's death. Tom/Jack's voice is amazing and very real. A heartbreakingly yet stunning tale.

Virginie says

Mind-blowing!

Aishie says

This book. What to say. I've read a lot of books recently that deal with psychosis-be it in children or adults (thank you thesis!), obviously these are medical/academic books, but this fiction work dips it's toe majestically into these waters. I have to say, this deals with a very sensitive subject (multiple sensitive subjects, actually) in such a thoughtful, considered manner, it was beautiful to read. Too often some subjects can be dramatised or exaggerated for effect, and a lot fall into these pitfalls along the way, but this author stayed true to the story, and to the voices in the story (read his dedications at the end!). I read the last few pages of this with tears in my eyes, and I haven't said that about any book in a while!

Erin Louise says

I'm so thankful for stumbling upon this book in the library (and for the kind secret note someone had left between its pages). It took the whole book for it to settle on me that Tom had been alone the whole time (not including the brief encounter with Harriet) for he had all the company he needed inside himself. I saw part of myself in Tom and that was both reassuring and a little daunting.

I couldn't put this book down and read it in 2 days, completely enthralled by the story and its characters. Not once did I think of Tom as mad, perhaps only as sane as he could be given the circumstances.

Heta says

No. I do applaud the author for taking a new perspective into dealing with psychosis and the loss of a sibling, but I could not get with the narrative structure. The constant dialogue between Tom and Jack got tiresome and was generally just unrealistic and annoying. Kudos to Stewart Foster for not feeding his readers with a spoon, though. He trusts the reader and it shows in this book as he does not make things explicit and leaves room for interpretation. But other than that, I could not get into this and didn't particularly care.

Chantalle says

I never write reviews but I really enjoyed this book! I haven't read too many books written in this style so it was a nice change. I do have a question (I couldn't find the Ask the Author to ask directly so I'm hoping he sees this)

What happened with the father? From what I could tell, there was a period of time where he just disappeared. What was he doing?

Does anyone have any theories?

Jan says

Hmm it wasn't bad. Interesting. At times a bit intriguing but I think the idea could have been better handled.

CJ says

This book, oh my god.

I literally don't know what to say, I've felt so many emotions over the past day (I powered this book in a day, don't judge me) that I'm speechless.

First of all, I love that the author has leaned towards particular diagnoses and allows the reader to make up their own mind. Does Tom have schizophrenia? Is he just reacting to his grief? Does his Dad have PTSD or is he really on the moon?

This story gives fantastic insight into what someone might experience with psychosis, and that 'the voices' aren't always negative. I felt every emotion with Tom, when Jack disappeared my heart stopped and I ended the book almost peacefully knowing Tom (and Jack) had accepted their fate as they swam into the water.

Mental illness isn't always what it seems, the reader sees Tom as a troubled, vulnerable young man but the terror of the stranger on the beach is how we as a society view people with mental health problems. I actually thought the story would come about that Tom killed Jack and his Mum, but in fact it was much more devastating.

It took me a couple of chapters to get used to the writing style but after that it flowed beautifully and it's the quickest I've ever gone through a book. I would highly recommend this to anyone!

S.D. Robertson says

What a fantastic novel by this debut author. It's an intelligent, thought-provoking and gripping tale of grief and mental illness. How nice to read a genuine unique voice for once and not to be spoon-fed as a reader.

Not to be missed.

Sam Drew says

A really good read, I couldn't put it down and blasted through it in a couple of days. The narration is very original and very brave: Foster shows the thoughts and feelings of two characters sharing one body. I've never seen anything like it before, it is the best attempt to get into the experience of grief and madness that I've read, and it makes for a very poignant, often darkly comic read. I look forward to seeing what the author does next!
