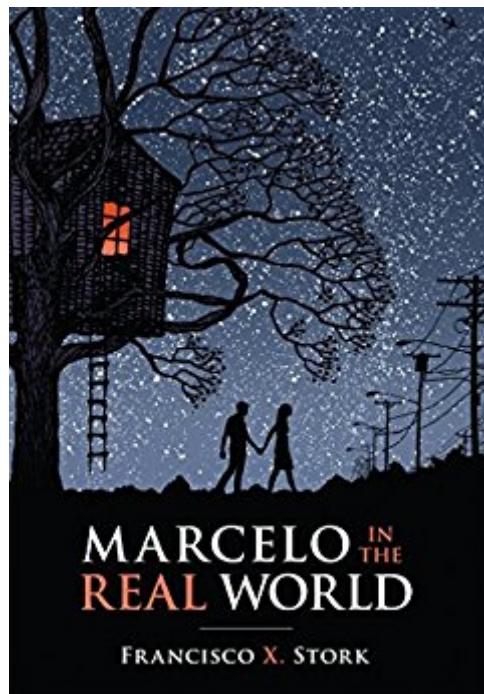


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Marcelo In The Real World



Synopsis

Imagine CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG . . . with a romance, and you have the beginnings of this story of a young man struggling with the world outside his head--and the woman who gets inside it. Marcelo Sandoval hears music no one else can hear--part of the autism-like impairment no doctor has been able to identify--and he's always attended a special school where his differences have been protected. But the summer after his junior year, his father demands that Marcelo work in his law firm's mailroom in order to experience "the real world." There Marcelo meets Jasmine, his beautiful and surprising coworker, and Wendell, the son of another partner in the firm. (cont'd)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

3.5 Stars
Seventeen year old Marcelo (pronounced "Marselo") is described as having an "autism-like" condition. That's as close as doctors can come to defining his unique gift of being able to hear music where no one else can. Unfortunately for Marcelo, his father doesn't see anything particularly rare or special about his son's gift. Instead, the father pushes Marcelo to take a job in the mailroom of his law firm --- dad's reasoning being that the position will teach Marcelo useful

skills about "the real world" and put him on the path to success, rather than let his mind run away with creative dreamer fancies. Once in the mailroom environment, Marcelo meets and befriends the lovely Jasmine and Wendell, the son of one of the partners at the law firm. As his father anticipated, the first days were an experience for Marcelo, to say the least, as another "autism-like" trait that Marcelo displays is a struggle with interpreting facial expressions. But thanks to classes Marcelo attends to help him learn tips & tricks to help him out with this (instruction in voice inflection, speech patterns, and the like), it actually doesn't take him too long to find his way. It's a tough time for the reader though. We have to watch Marcelo navigate around co-workers who assume he's mentally incompetent, or those who try to bully or take advantage of him because he can't immediately recognize that he is being tricked. This is the "real world" his father so desperately wanted him to be a part of... thanks, dad! Marcelo develops a love for religious texts and often turns to reading or reciting scripture to himself to calm his nerves when the world starts to overwhelm him. At one point, he finds himself unexpectedly caught up in one of his father's most important legal cases, one that will push Marcelo to fight for what he believes in, regardless of what others around him might say. After being published in 2009, in 2010 this novel was awarded the Schneider Family Book Award for Teen Fiction, an award that recognizes fiction that focuses on characters with disabilities. I've come across pages of glowing reviews for this one, and while I did very much enjoy it, I can't comfortably join the 5 star crowd here. The story had some dents for me. I loved Marcelo, the way his mind worked and his unique style of interacting with others even if he didn't (admittedly) always understand all the unspoken social cues. Something in that I found myself relating to quite a bit. His friendship with Jasmine is sweet & lovely and I found myself wishing he and Wendell could get on a bit better. So the characters undeniably spoke to me on some level. My trouble was with the writing. Some of the characters came off just a little too weirdly staccato in their speech and mannerisms for my enjoyment. The flow of things just felt a shade off from natural. In Marcelo's case it's understandable and almost expected, given that he's been diagnosed with a "autism-like" condition, but that doesn't explain the other characters! Also, if I'm being honest with my reading experience... there was just something a little... lackluster maybe?... with the plot as a whole, as far as pace and plot action. I was all about this story in the early pages! Those first few chapters definitely had me hooked. But this was one of those books where I could feel my love and interest of it slowly trickling down instead of racing up. Reading pages on end and then realizing later, "you know, that was actually a whole lotta nothing going on" ... and the book's not even that long! Still, I did quite like Stork's message here -- the way Marcelo finds his own voice in a sea of so many others telling him what he needs or what he should do --- it made me curious to try out some of

Stork's other works just to compare, so I now have a couple on order. Even with the elements I myself found problematic, I would still solidly recommend this to anyone looking for YA reads featuring the theme of autism and enhanced abilities.

I was assuming this book would be about the struggles an autistic teen faced when forced out of his comfort zone--but it was so so much more. Instead of the surface-level day-to-day struggles the main character faced, which I had expected, the author surprised me by forcing him to deal with much more difficult issues such as moral dilemmas, which is a true struggle for someone with autism who tends to view things as strictly black and white, having trouble processing things that fall into a gray area. It was apparent that Stork must have known someone (or several someones) personally who have struggled with this disorder in order to be able to write from the main character's POV without painting a stereotyped, stock character. This was very well done.

Seventeen-year-old Marcelo, who has neurological differences similar to Asperger's Syndrome, will soon start his senior year of high school. His father's income as founding partner of a law firm has provided the opportunity to attend Paterson, an excellent school for individuals with disabilities. There, he has been accepted for who he is and allowed as much time as he needs to process what's going on in his environment and finish tasks. This is a place where Marcelo isn't rushed and feels accepted and appreciated for who he is. Like Christopher Boone, the Aspergian protagonist of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, Marcelo has a special interest. While Christopher's passion is math, Marcelo is fascinated with God and religion. His family is Catholic, and he enjoys praying the Rosary. He also delves into the holy books of different religions, and his mother arranges for him to have regular discussions with a rabbi. This is not a pervasive interest that lends itself to static thinking -- he is not memorizing train schedules or sports scores. He is exploring abstract ideas, like Man's relationship to God and the experience of prayer. When Marcelo finishes his junior year of high school, his father decides he needs to come out of the protected environment of Paterson and learn to cope with the "real world." This involves a summer job with his father's law firm, which is a bit like being thrown into a viper pit. While Marcelo asks the rabbi questions like "Why were Adam and Eve ashamed, after eating from the Tree of Knowledge, when they realized they were naked?" he experiences his own journey from innocence to knowledge. He is facing human evil in various forms: encountering people who are driven by greed, lust, anger, and sheer pettiness. When he discovers the photo of a girl with a mutilated face, which has been pulled out of the legal files and discarded, he feels compelled to find out what really

happened and what his co-workers aren't telling him about their company's biggest lawsuit. Marcel soon faces some very difficult decisions. As we watch Marcelo leave the Garden of Eden, we also see him struggle with various decisions -- large and small. He is no longer in a static world where tasks are clearly laid out, he gets as much time as he needs, and right answers are usually clear. He has to decide whether a task merits being done at a slow, meticulous pace or if it has to be done quickly. He has to "read" people who are not being straightforward about what they mean. He has to improvise. He is learning what the best autism therapies try to teach -- to "read" people and situations, adapt, solve problems, and make choices. Part of this is deciding how to respond to unethical behavior, even on the part of his own father. When his dad puts Marcelo in the "real world," and asks him to make decisions accordingly, he gets more than he bargained for. I found Marcelo to be a multi-layered, believable character with a compelling story who experiences tremendous growth throughout the novel. There are many layers of truth in this book, from how people with neurological differences learn to the role of faith in human life and the nature of good and evil. It's definitely a book I won't forget.

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