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Kraus, Daniel. Rotters

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After his mother is struck by a bus and killed, 16 year old straight-A student Joey Crouch boards a bus to Bloughton, Iowa, to live with his estranged father Ken Harnett. Known in town as the Garbageman, Harnett is neither an idea father nor roommate. His small house is unkempt, full of newspaper stacks and a strong odor; Harnett himself disappears for days at a time, leaving Joey with no food or money.

After discovering a safe full of putrid jewels in his father's closet, Joey follows Harnett one night, stowing away in the bed of his pickup with a disposable camera. Forgetting about the consequence of a flash late at night, Joey snaps a photo: "Everything was illuminated in one instant of motionless clarity: individual blades of tall grass, bugs caught in the air like thrown pebbles, the mirrored surface of the truck, my father, his stunned expression, the handheld wire cutter, the sparkle of multiple jeweled rings, and, clenched in my father's fist, wearing these rings, a severed human hand. … My father is a grave robber."

Unlike most teens who catch a parent red-handed robbing a grave, Joey wants nothing more than to join his father. Though initially hesitant and refusing, Harnett begins to train Joey in the art of digging – burying Joey's homework assignments or shoes deep beneath the earth hours before the start of school, lecturing on the art and history of grave robbing as Joey digs.

Obviously not a hot topic in contemporary literature for any age, Kraus writes about grave robbing a little too realistically for comfort – all the while providing mystery, intrigue, and the intricate exploration of a powerful connection between father and son. At times, this subterranean novel is graphic, horrific, and downright gooey, but Kraus' unforgettable writing strengthens the allure of this dark, multilayered world of bullies young and old, live and dead, and of fathers and sons, in a way that keeps the pages turning.

kraus and rotters
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