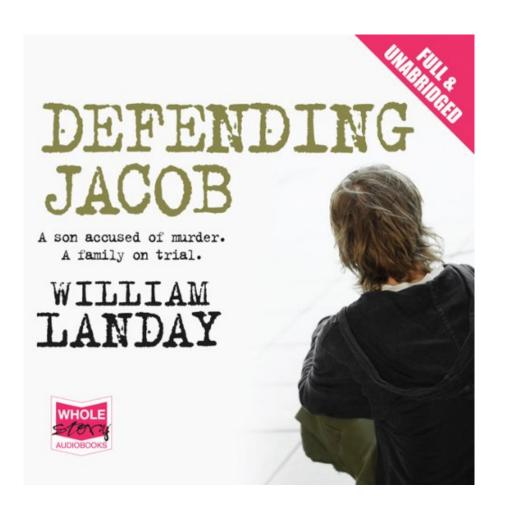


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Andy Barber's job is to put killers behind bars. So when a boy from his son Jacob's school is found stabbed to death, Andy is doubly determined to find and prosecute the perpetrator. Until a crucial piece of evidence turns up linking Jacob to the murder. In the face of every parent's worst nightmare, Andy and his wife Laurie will do anything to defend their child. Because, deep down, they know him better than anyone. Don't they?

Sales Rank: #106322 in AudiblePublished on: 2012-04-09

• Format: Unabridged

Original language: English Running time: 884 minutes

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905 of 947 people found the following review helpful.

Page-turning legal thriller and family drama

By "switterbug" Betsey Van Horn

This is as much a nuanced family drama, love story, and social inquisition as it is a murder/courtroom/legal thriller. If you can engage with the narrator, whose reliability or unreliability is a puzzle to piece together, you will be satisfied with this warm yet dark story of a community and family unhinged by a violent crime. The author is a former DA who is skilled at informing the reader about the law and procedure without telegraphing it. The narrative is even, polished, and intelligently observant of a community in shock, a family shattered.

I have relatives in Newton, Massachusetts, where this thriller takes place. It is an upscale community of educated professionals, whose children graduate from tony high schools and go on to Ivy League colleges. A fourteen-year-old boy stabbed to death in the park is incomprehensible to this insulated and well-heeled population. As prosperous as it is, there is also a provincial air to it, as like-minded families have always experienced security and safety here, and there is an expectation and history of benevolence. Violence is rare.

Jacob, the fourteen-year-old son of First District Attorney Andy Barber, is accused of murdering his classmate, Ben Rifkin. In Massachusetts, fourteen-year-olds charged with first-degree murder are tried as adults. Barber narrates the story with depth and dread, exposing some family secrets along the way, which could impact the case, and creates increasing internal trauma for his wife, Laurie. Their marriage has always been an ongoing love story; they met as freshmen in college and have loved each other unfailingly through the years. This event mires them in vulnerability and heavy exposure to the media, placing them under a public microscope. Do they really know their son? How much can parents really get inside the soul of their children? And, no matter how strong a marriage seems, a blow like this can undermine what is truly a fragile trust.

Landay has a talent for metaphor and imagery, rendered beautifully in the elegiac narrative. Woven through the story, in the old-school typed transcript of a court reporter, is yet another narrative, of Barber as a witness before the grand jury. How this fits into the rest of the story is gradually disclosed, and its presence is both suspenseful and revealing. Landay's dialogue is crisply cinematic but organic to the characters. His flair for teen-speak is spot-on.

Jacob, who is largely inscrutable, is developed through the eyes of other characters--and at a slight remove, which adds to the suspense. Is he a cipher? A typical teenager? The unknown X factor of Jacob draws out the detective spirit of the reader. The character that really blossoms on the pages is Andy, who reveals, through his agony, more than his contained self-assessment. He is a tormented man trying to protect his family, but his tenacity and inexorable faith in his son may have dire consequences.

I read this book in two long sittings, and savored every page. Critically, one could point to some of the technical flaws, but personally, I greedily devoured every passage and capitulated to the subtle narrative.

263 of 284 people found the following review helpful.

An unsettling picture on an exquisite but disturbing canvas

By Bookreporter

I have just spent the entirety of one night and part of another reading a remarkable novel called DEFENDING JACOB. It's been a while since William Landay has graced the bookshelves with his presence, and his latest is quite different from his last effort, THE STRANGLER. While both books deal with family dynamics and loyalty, DEFENDING JACOB hits uncomfortably but unerringly close to home, as compelling a work as you are likely to pick up this year.

The basic premise of the book is deceptively simple. A 14-year-old boy named Jacob Barber, is accused of the murder of Ben Rifkin, one of his middle-school classmates. Jacob's father, Andy, has been an Assistant District Attorney for 22 years in the quiet Boston suburb that the family calls home. Andy does not consider his job a stepping stone to higher office; he is content to simply do the best job he can. So when Ben's body is first discovered, Andy takes charge of the initial investigation, working with the police in directing the gathering of evidence. But the investigation seems to proceed slowly, almost from the beginning, and when what evidence there is appears to point to Jacob as the killer, Andy is removed from the case and placed in the position of defending his son from the charges that, from his viewpoint, are most certainly false. In his mind, there can be no other conclusion.

Jacob's guilt or innocence is unknown throughout most of DEFENDING JACOB. But what is a certainty is that all is not right. Andy is a smart and experienced prosecutor who knows all too well how evidence can be wrongfully construed. Accordingly, he goes through Jacob's things, hiding this and destroying that and concealing the other. He does it with the chilling certitude that he is not protecting a murderer, but merely keeping his innocent son from a wrongful conviction. Innocent or guilty, there is something about Jacob that's wrong, and dreadfully so. What Andy construes as the quiet moodiness of adolescence in Jacob emerges as something that is much more unsettling and sinister. This is revealed through stories told by Jacob's friends, a number of whom take his involvement in Ben's murder as a cold, hard truth. At the same time, Andy harbors a secret about his past and ancestry that he has concealed from everyone and fears will be revealed, even as he agonizes over the possibility that his secret may well be the cause of Jacob's problems.

Andy's conflicts notwithstanding, it is Laurie Barber, Andy's wife and Jacob's mother, who slowly realizes the truth about her son during the investigation, arrest and trial. The difference between Andy and Laurie is that Andy cannot conceive of a world where his son committed murder; Laurie can, and it is the fact that she can believe such a thing could occur --- whether it did or not --- that causes her physical and mental deterioration. As the trial, verdict and aftermath unfold, the book ends not so much in a climax as it does in a series of explosive incidents and revelations, each greater than the next, until a rough justice of sorts is achieved. Or is it?

DEFENDING JACOB is one of those rare books that offers a riveting story in addition to raising profound questions and issues for which we do not have the knowledge or capability to answer yet. Is the human capacity for violence an inherited trait, or is it something we learn? How far can, and should, a parent go to protect a child? Is this judicial system an effective way to deal with criminals, or should alternative methods be considered? DEFENDING JACOB presents an unsettling picture on an exquisite but disturbing canvas, one that will haunt the reader long after the final sentences of the book are read.

Reviewed by Joe Hartlaub

591 of 684 people found the following review helpful.

Great Premise - Dragged Out

By Darcia Helle

For me, this book had highs and lows. I'll start with the good stuff. The plot tackles multiple issues, expertly woven together, and laid out for us to ponder. At the heart of the story is the controversial topic of the `murder gene' and whether the propensity for violence is in our DNA. We question whether our family history changes how people perceive us. And, along with the characters, we wonder how far we would go to protect our child.

Now for the not so good stuff. I did not always find the parents, the father in particular, believable. He stumbles upon a few red flags with his son's activities, yet he never once confronts his son about these things. His character is a bit too much of an ostrich, sticking his head in the sand and pretending all is well. The characters aren't well-developed and I didn't connect well with any of them.

The biggest disappointment for me is the pace of the story. It drags. We spend a lot of time in the narrator's head and his thoughts become repetitive. The trial begins about 2/3 through the book and the pace slows to a crawl. We read long snippets of the trial transcript. Everything is rehashed for us in trial format, but none of the information is new. The experience left me feeling disconnected and bored, rather than involved or on the edge of my seat in suspense. By the time I arrived at the twist at the end, which should have been stunning, I breathed a sigh of relief that it was over.

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