

Just Don't Fall: How I Grew Up, Conquered Illness, and Made It Down The Mountain

by Josh Sundquist

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Reviewed by:

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Overview

The title of the book, *Just Don't Fall: How I Grew Up, Conquered Illness, and Made It Down The Mountain*, alludes to the fact that the author has overcome real challenge in his life; a challenge that many traditionally aged college students have only experienced in third person. First impression: This is a personal story about survival, the story takes place in a contemporary setting, and it seems like the book is easy to read.

Josh Sundquist, an intelligent, ambitious, determined, and entrepreneurial individual, plays center stage in this entertaining, inspirational, and informative autobiography. Through candid snapshots of his life, Josh introduces the reader to the life-changing events and influential people that shaped his journey into adulthood. You might assume this book is about his coming of age with a disability; however, you quickly come to understand that Josh does not consider losing a leg to cancer a handicap. To Josh, losing his leg to cancer is just another obstacle he must overcome in the pursuit of his dreams. In a very relatable way, Josh translates his story of growing up, pursuing his dreams, and making hard decisions along the way to a variety of readers.

In the beginning of the book, Josh introduces us to his childhood, which includes growing up in a tight-knit family, involvement in a church community, and learning about life in a homeschool environment. This is the lens through which Josh views and interacts, humorously, with the people and situations he encounters in life. Very quickly, Josh begins to relate the process of managing cancer as a child: the emotional battle, the physical struggle, the role of community, and the mental stamina necessary to overcome illness. Eventually, after temporarily losing his hair, his leg, and part of his childhood to the fight against cancer, Josh finds an outlet and purpose in skiing. At this point, Josh recognizes his dream to become a Paralympics athlete.

After this emotional introduction, the rest of the book chronicles how Josh makes choices to follow his dreams. At 15, Josh begins his career—mostly unsuccessfully at first—as a motivational speaker. He also displays his entrepreneurial side by raising all the money necessary to attend ski training camp. He eventually goes to college, learns how to relate to his peers, and develops a more mature and humanistic side. Determined to overcome life's obstacles, Josh struggles with motivation, confidence, and finding direction. We learn about the struggles Josh's family endures, including his dad's challenges to pursue his own dream of becoming a minister, his mother's personal battle with cancer, and the melodrama of his younger siblings. In the end, Josh makes it on the Paralympics Ski Team and becomes a successful motivational speaker; his family finds healing in the strength of their relationship. In true Olympic fashion, Josh eventually becomes the hero of his own story.

In the cover insert, Josh uses the following words to describe himself: "son, brother, cancer survivor, writer, Paralympic ski racer, and motivational speaker." Through this humorous memoir, the reader comes to know Josh and his family through each of these identities. Josh enjoys a loving relationship with his family, and their influence and support are also major themes in the story. His comical dad is the head of the household and very supportive of Josh. Diligently present

and loving, Josh's mother shares a commonality with her son through her own battle with cancer.

Although Josh has several siblings, his younger brother Matthew is highlighted throughout the book. Not only does Matthew play the sibling antagonist, but he also illustrates the deep connection between some siblings. Matthew, a young child at the time, attempts suicide as he is forced to deal with his brother's sickness. At this moment, the reader is faced with the harsh realities illness brings into the lives of the individuals who love and support the person battling illness.

Once Josh is older, the story shifts to his pursuit of skiing and introduces many individuals who play an influential role in his coming of age. These individuals include supportive high school friends, educational college roommates, influential coaches, and charismatic teammates/mentors. Josh pays tribute to all the lessons he learns from these people throughout the book. Even at the end, Josh relies on the opportunities he creates, the choices he makes, and the gifts he has been given to realize his dream.

Application

Two main criteria in selecting a successful common reading are: 1) knowing what the diverse audience of readers will easily relate to, and 2) seeing how the themes will translate into rich discussion groups and engaging programming opportunities. Two major themes that can be drawn from this book are pursuing personal dreams and persisting in times of failure and disappointment. This book allows the reader and/or administrator to take broad-stroke themes and translate them to a personal connection or directive learning outcome.

Josh effectively illustrates how to identify a goal, create action steps, and take responsibility for moving toward a dream. From the beginning of the book, Josh has his "eye on one prize"—being part of a team and wearing a team jersey. Before cancer, Josh wanted to play soccer and wear a uniform. Once Josh discovers how he must interact with the world as an amputee, he is able to reframe his goal of wearing a soccer uniform to that of wearing skier's bib. Throughout the book Josh highlights how he intentionally identified goals and resources that lead him on a path to realize his dream. He illustrates how important it is to take active steps toward one's goals after they have been identified. Even when things happened outside of his control, part of Josh's success was his ability to maintain focus on the end result. Josh continues taking steps, no matter how small, toward his goal. One of the strong discussion and programming opportunities from this book is just this—his use of goal setting to achieve success and celebrate small victories.

Another major theme can be drawn from the title of the book, *Just Don't Fall*. In college, Josh confides in a counselor that he is struggling with depression. In one of the meetings, Josh identifies an ongoing source of anxiety—the fear of failure. He says, "Because you only live once. I don't have time to fail" (p. 273). By the end of the book, Josh recognizes that it was from "falling" that he learned the most. Josh has a winner's attitude, a sort of invincibility complex common to many young adults. College is a time where students have the opportunity to open doors for themselves, learn from their mistakes, figure out how to problem solve, and use their intuition and resources. College is basically an experiment to survive, and ideally thrive, as a productive member of society. It is also a time when some students have to deal with the reality of not succeeding, reaching their goals, or meeting their expectations. Josh's journey is an opportunity to normalize the concept of trying something new even at the risk of failing. Students should value the journey of obtaining a degree, coming into self-discovery, and choosing to use their gifts and talents productively and proactively.

Additional special interest topics and program opportunities can be drawn from this book. Growing up in a faith-based community as well as the specific transitional issues faced by home-schooled students in the college environment are just two examples of potential discussion

opportunities. Research suggests that spiritual identity is one of the more underdeveloped identities during the college experience, and this book provides a platform to broach that topic. Also, the book offers excellent exercises in reflecting on choices we have or do not have, assumptions we make, and the ways we relate to our community through the lens of someone who is differently abled. Sports teams might find connection to Josh's story of overcoming obstacles and achieving goals in the athletic arena. Finally, one attractive bonus this book may bring to a common reading program is that Josh is currently touring as a motivational speaker. He is young, energetic, and in-touch with today's college student. He also has an interactive website with video blogs, Q&A opportunities, and a large fan base on Facebook.

Josh's motivational story has the potential to draw in a variety of readers through small groups or campus-wide initiatives and programming opportunities. College students might be inspired to see someone of a similar age using personal gifts to make a positive change in the world. They will be able to relate to the author who struggles for balance between the expectations of family and the desire to be his own person. Second impression of this book: We can choose to succeed despite the cards we have been dealt; Josh's story is inspirational, and people should never be judged by their "cover."