

Book Review: Hidden Pictures
By Jason Rekulak

Can spirits impact events among the living? Do they even exist? Can they manipulate a person's body to perform acts it might otherwise be incapable of?

Bizarre questions, I know. But that's what we're asked to believe in Jason Rekulak's supernatural novel "Hidden Pictures."

However, stretching the imagination to accept the presence and influence of spirits is not the challenge in this book that was first published two years ago. It's the lack of believability in the characters and storyline that bog down the book's readability.

In present day Philadelphia, 21-year-old Mallory Quinn has just completed 18 months in rehab when her sponsor, Russell, helps her obtain a summer job as a babysitter for Ted and Caroline Maxwell in a nearby affluent New Jersey neighborhood. Mallory quickly bonds with the couple's 5-year-old son Teddy and relishes the small cottage she lives in on the Maxwell's property.

Teddy is rarely seen without his sketch pad and colored pencils, usually drawing an assortment of animals, trees and balloons. He also frequently references Anya, his imaginary friend. One day, however, he draws a man in a forest dragging a woman's lifeless body. Subsequent drawings become even more sinister and take on a quality well beyond that of a 5-year-old. Mallory – when told that a woman named Annie mysteriously disappeared years ago from the same cottage she's currently living in – begins to suspect that a supernatural force is providing clues to a long-unsolved murder.

Mallory has her own demons in her past, and not just drugs or alcohol. We learn that she was behind the wheel when a car accident claimed the life of her younger sister, Beth, who was sitting in the back seat. Believing she is to blame for her sister's death, she becomes obsessed

with trying to decipher the drawings and save Teddy – though it's unclear why she thinks Teddy is in danger.

With the help of a psychic neighbor, Mitzi, and a young landscaper, Adrian, Mallory wrestles with her own past while attempting to solve the mystery of the drawings.

The narrative begins to fray when Mallory shows the drawings to Ted and Caroline claiming a spirit is possessing Teddy. Knowing their babysitter is fresh out of recovery, why wouldn't the Maxwells immediately think she's crazy and get rid of her?

Unless they know more than they're letting on?

The drawings referenced in the story are illustrated in the book, which adds a positive dimension to the narrative, sort of allowing the reader to examine the clues and work alongside Mallory. But there are too many loose ends, not to mention the not-too-subtle political and religious references, to keep the story at least halfway believable.

"Hidden Pictures" is still an interesting read, and the illustrations add a unique quality. But the people and storyline are a bit too transparent to accept.

Three out of five stars for "Hidden Pictures."