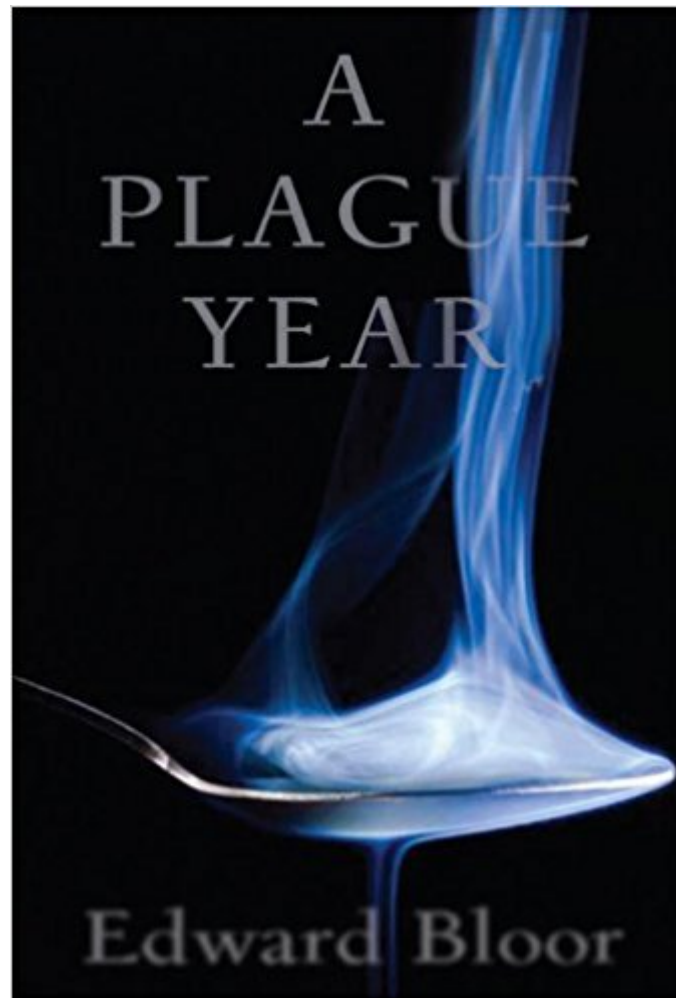




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A Plague Year



Synopsis

It starts small, with petty thefts of cleaning supplies and Sudafed from the supermarket where Tom works. But the plague picks up speed, tearing through his town with a ferocity and velocity that surprises everyone. By year's end there will be ruined, hollow people on every street corner. Meth will unmake the lives of friends and teachers and parents. It will fill the prisons, and the morgues. Tom has always been focused on getting out of his depressing coal-mining town, on escaping to a college somewhere sunny and far away. But as bits of his childhood erode around him, he finds it's not so easy to let go. When home and family are a lost cause, do you turn your back? Or are some lost causes worth fighting for?

Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

Customer Reviews

EDWARD BLOOR is the author of several acclaimed novels including *Taken*, winner of the Florida Sunshine State Young Reader Award; *London Calling*, a Book Sense 76 Top Ten selection; and *Tangerine*, which was an ALA Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, a Horn Book Fanfare Selection, and a Bulletin Blue Ribbon Book.

Monday, September 10, 2001 I was staring through the window of Dad's van when I saw

the shopping cart, stranded like a lost dog at the corner of Sunbury Street and Lower Falls Road. The green plastic trim and the white Food Giant logo identified it as one of ours. Maybe a customer had wheeled it, illegally, to a house around the corner, unloaded it, and then wheeled it back to that spot in an effort to say, I didn't really steal this. I was just borrowing it. You can have it back now. Whatever. It wouldn't be there for long. Bobby Smalls would pass this way in ten minutes. He would spot the cart and then comment bitterly about the person who had left it there, since he'd have to retrieve it as his first job of the day. Dad turned right and our van bumped across the dark expanse of blacktop in front of the supermarket. The Food Giant sign was still in its low-wattage setting, glowing like a rectangular night light for the town of Blackwater. Dad is the general manager of this Food Giant, and he spends most of his waking life there. Although it was still an hour before opening and the lot was empty, he backed our Dodge Caravan into an outer space--a requirement for all employees. He asked, "Do you want me to leave it running, Tom?" "No. I'll just open a window." "Okay. I'll leave the keys in case you change your mind. I'll be about fifteen minutes, provided the system is up." I yawned, "Okay," and lowered the electric window before he could turn the key. Plan A was that Dad would drive me to school, which meant I would get there way early, before anybody, which meant that no one would see me being dropped off by a parent. This was infinitely better than plan B. In plan B, Mom would drop me off later, in front of everybody, which meant that I might as well be wearing a yellow patrol boy vest and carrying a Pokemon lunch box. But first we'd had to stop at the Food Giant because the Centralized Reporting System had been down the night before, so Dad hadn't been able to input all his sales figures, reorders, et cetera, and send them to the corporate office. In theory, he would input those figures now, and we would be gone before the opening shift arrived at 6:45. I watched him walk across the large, rolling parking lot. The Food Giant was built, like much of Blackwater, on the uneven landscape of Pennsylvania coal country. If a shopping cart got away from you in this lot, it could roll for fifty yards, building up to a speed of twenty miles per hour before it crashed into a parked vehicle. That could do some serious damage, as any cart retriever would tell you. Dad disabled the alarm, unlocked the automatic doors, and slipped inside. I opened my PSAT prep book, hoping to get in a few minutes of study time. But that was not to be. First, I looked up and saw Bobby's mother drop him off, fifteen minutes early, as usual. He was wearing his green Food Giant slicker in case of rain. (Bobby was always prepared. The Boy Scouts just said it; Bobby lived it.) After listening impatiently to some final words from his mother, he pushed away from the Explorer and started walking back toward Sunbury Street and that abandoned cart. Mrs. Smalls

drove on to her job at the Good Samaritan Hospital. Then, just as I had returned to my book, a louder engine sound disturbed me. A black tow truck, driving too fast, bounced across the parking lot and took a hard left at the ATM. Its high-mounted headlights flashed right into my eyes. Then the driver killed the lights and backed up to the front of the store. A man in a hooded sweatshirt and a black ski mask jumped out on the passenger side. He reached into the back of the truck and rolled out a metal hook so large that I could see it clearly from two hundred feet away. He wedged the hook into a slot in the ATM and gave the driver a hand signal. The truck lurched forward, creating a god-awful sound. I was now sitting bolt upright and staring at them. They were trying to rip the ATM out of the wall and make off with it--steal the whole thing and crack it open later for the cash inside. Suddenly, to my right, I saw a figure approaching. It was Bobby Smalls. He came running back clumsily in his green rain slicker, without the cart. He started waving his arms and shouting at the robbers. I thought, Oh no, Bobby. Not now! Keep away from them! I slid over into the driver's seat and grabbed the steering wheel, trying to think what to do. I started pounding on the horn, making as big a racket as I could. The driver, dressed in the same type of dark disguise, stepped out of the truck. He was holding a strange object. It took me a few seconds to realize what it was--a compound bow. He then produced a feathered arrow, nocked it, and aimed it right at Bobby's short, advancing body. The beeping horn got Dad's attention. He appeared behind the glass in the entranceway, looking bewildered. He pulled the door open and stepped outside, holding out one hand toward Bobby like a traffic cop trying to get him to halt. The bowman changed his aim from Bobby to Dad and then back again. Was he going to shoot one of them? Or shoot one, reload, and get the other? Or was he just trying to scare them? I couldn't take the chance. I cranked the car key and hit the gas pedal. The old van roared like an angry lion. I yanked at the gearshift, still revving the engine, and dropped it into drive. The van took off with a squeal of spinning tires and rocketed across the parking lot. The bow-and-arrow guy turned toward me and froze like a deer caught in the headlights. Then he aimed the bow right at me. I thought, Can an arrow pierce the windshield? He must have asked himself that same question and decided it could not. He lowered his weapon, tossed it into the cab, and climbed back into the driver's seat. I continued to accelerate toward the truck, closing the gap quickly, like I was going to ram it. (Honestly, I had no idea what I was going to do.) By now, the other man had unhooked the cable and had scrambled inside the cab, too. The truck lurched forward and drove right at me, like in a deadly game of chicken. I hit the brakes and steered to the right, throwing the van into a wild skid, stopping just feet away from the frozen-in-place figure of Bobby Smalls. The tow truck continued across the parking lot and shot across Route 16, accelerating away into the

darkness. I turned off the van's engine, threw open the door, and hopped out. Suddenly everything was quiet. From the Hardcover edition.

I loved this amazing book and how I could not ever stop reading!!!! I read at reading hour in school at the end of the day and I got out late sometimes bc I was so drawn into the book and hadn't noticed everyone had left!

A Plague Year had so much potential to be a powerful realistic story of a poor mining town destroyed by meth. I was hoping for a rural YA version of the must read classic David Simon book *The Corner*. (The book that became the basis of the HBO series *The Wire*.) Instead it is another disappointment from one of my favorite YA authors. The destruction of families is mentioned only superficially in a couple of conversations. The neglect and abuse of children by their addict parents is absent completely. Most of the book focuses on 15 year old Tom, a hard working ambitious town native anxious to escape via college. Tom is an unreliable narrator. Since he spends most of his time either working or studying, he is oblivious to the troubles of his friends and classmates. There are many references to townspeople turning into zombies, but since Tom has no relationship with any of these people, they are not a focal point of the events. The school support group for students dealing with addiction problems could have been an intense setting for the characters to come together, reveal their fears and pain, and connect. Instead, the group meetings come off as preachy. It was bizarre that the town police department ignores the meth problem, but goes out of its way to nail pot smokers and small time pot dealers. It was also odd that even after Tom becomes suspicious that some of his father's employees are addicts, he never says anything to his father, and there is no explanation of why Tom stays silent. The ending of the story was stilted and contrived. It almost read as if Bloor did not know how to wrap up the events, so he just ended them. *The Plague Year* is a great idea for a story that deserves much better.

This book is a good read for adolescents. It describes how drug addiction takes over and can ruin people's lives.

I didn't just read *The Plague Year*, I studied it as it was a reading competition book for my high school. I must say that it is sloppily written and it is obvious the author is not from Pennsylvania. You can never quite pin down where he places his town of Blackwater, Pennsylvania. He seems to want to place it in the eastern part of the state dropping names like

“Schuylkill County” and references to the fictional town of “Caldera” that has an uncontrollable mine fire underneath it like the real town of Centralia also in the eastern part of the state. But the quick jaunt to the site of the Flight 93 plane crash which happened in Somerset County, would put them in the southwestern portion of Pennsylvania. He also casually mentions anthracite and bituminous coal but anthracite is only found in the far east of Pennsylvania. Also showing a lack of research, the “Food Giant” supermarket prominent in the story would never have sold beer in 2001. Pennsylvania has such ridiculous liquor laws that this was illegal then and only sporadically legal today. I found it hard to believe that the Florida police would just allow protagonist Tom to walk away from an active investigation but the plot must roll on! The nasty depiction of Boy Scouts selling Christmas trees was also unkind and over the top. This book would have worked had Mr. Bloor researched a bit more and boned up on his geography. Opportunity lost. This is not even the ghost of the story of Breaking Bad. If you are looking for someone like Walter White, don’t walk away but run away.

Edward Bloor has crafted a powerful page turner about a small town facing the siege of methamphetamine and the teens who fight back. Tom Coleman began a journal on Monday, September 10, 2001 as part of a school assignment. His life is divided between his studies and his unpaid work at the Food Giant his dad runs, but he does squeeze in some PSAT preparation. When his story begins, he is viewing a robbery at the Food Giant and realizes an employee is in trouble. He acts quickly to stop it before anyone gets hurt, and then heads to school. This opening begins a pattern for Tom, though of course his life changes with everyone else after 9/11. His small Pennsylvania town is not far from Shanksville, where United Flight 93 crashes after the heroic passengers take it over. But Tom is undergoing another change. His mother wants him and his older sister to attend an after-school drug discussion group, as addiction runs in his family and his sister already has one marijuana-related arrest. Tom and Lilly are surprised to find that their estranged wrong-side-of-the-tracks cousin has joined the meeting. Arthur is trying to stop the pattern of drugs that has affected his family. The counseling group is run by Catherine, a counselor from a local university. Her beautiful daughter, Wendy, is there, and soon Tom is trying to get her attention. When she invites him to a party on the “right” side of town, Tom discovers that ugliness can be found under the surface anywhere. The group begins taking field trips to Shanksville to see the crash site and other powerful locations as the teens struggle to envision their futures outside of

their dying small town among the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Tom is more determined than ever to go to college and tries new schemes to make money. He travels to Florida over Thanksgiving weekend with the estranged relatives to sell Christmas trees, and sees how citizens are forced to resort to extreme measures to survive in his town. More and more people are stealing Sudafed and other over-the-counter items to make drugs from the store, and Tom sees the effects when they become like zombies in every way. He and his fellow group members decide to fight back by forming a group at a local church and collecting clothing and food for the ill people. At one meeting, the teens even give the clothes off their backs. Several of their families are now affected by drug abuse, and Tom and his friends learn about some who have lost their homes or just disappeared. The darkness of the book's theme is blended well with the overall darkness of life in this country after the 2001 terrorist attacks, and Tom is a hero who will stay with you. While there is not much hope for those involved with methamphetamine, the efforts of Tom and his crew will inspire you as much as those in this all-too-realistic fictional story. Reviewed by Amy Alessio

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