

Hannah Packard
Editorial Assessment | *Mischief Miracle*

Summary

Mischief Miracle is a feel-good Christmas story about Ryan Brooks, a young man whose involvement in a cruel prank leads him on a journey of learning empathy for others—especially those less fortunate than himself. The setting has the feel of a small town in the U.S., which heightens the quaint and heartfelt nature of the story, drawing the reader further into this coming-of-age snapshot in Ryan's life.

While the Christmas setting isn't a central focus of *Mischief Miracle*, the best place for it to be published would be in a holiday-themed issue of a literary magazine or anthology. It would also likely find the most success with a Christian publication in search of inspirational fiction due to its religious subtheme. If published in an online space, this story has the potential to be popular on social media during the holidays.

Strengths

I think *Mischief Miracle* is strong in several areas! The first is the heartfelt theme. Without preaching to the reader, Ryan's story displays the importance of compassion and empathy in our daily lives. Reading about true human connection and growth is always heartwarming, but especially during Christmastime! The second is consistent tone and voice. The author's writing style felt distinctive throughout, but not so strong that it was distracting, striking a good balance. As mentioned in the previous point, it's easy for stories like this to feel preachy. But the tone used here was not that way at all, which is also helpful in keeping the reader from disliking the main character of the story.

The third is a grounded setting. Despite some tweaks I'd like to see (further comments below), the setting of *Mischief Miracle* is still strong. Without overtly describing any real identifying details, the author effectively conveys the world that the characters are living in—a small town in the U.S., maybe in the Midwest. This grounds the story and helps it feel real and relatable.

Potential Areas for Improvement

Overall, the story will need a general grammar check; I noticed a few instances of missing or out-of-place words and punctuation. But there are a few other opportunities for improvement as well. First, I would love to see further clarity on the setting, particularly the time the story is set in, as the math of what year it would take place in doesn't quite line up with certain dated elements of dialogue and locations. A few parts of the dialogue between Steve and Ryan in the beginning struck me as especially dated and slangy, but that could be personal preference.

The second and main opportunity for improvement in *Mischief Miracle* is the character development. A story like this is inherently about character growth and change. Yet the progression of Ryan's development was a bit muddled and underdeveloped, especially in the middle. I'd love to see the author clearly draw the through line of Ryan's emotional growth, especially through the time he is volunteering at the care center. Ryan's dad, Cliff, could also use a bit more development, just to let the reader in on if he's feeling anything other than anger while he's teaching Ryan this lesson.

The third area is pacing and strengthening the story's arc, which I've mentioned a bit already. The plot marches well through the beginning until it hits Ryan's key moments of growth during the volunteer weekends. Then everything is glossed over. I would love to see those weekends expanded into proper scenes! This will help even out the pacing as well as give the opportunity for more character development. See the manuscript itself for further comments.

Mischief Miracle

Ryan Brooks sat on a bench outside Harris Electronics while his dad dropped off a clock radio for repair. The unseasonably mild November weather had most folks in their shirtsleeves. He stretched his arms across the back of the bench and basked in the warmth of the afternoon sun.

“Sup, bro?” The loud voice jolted Ryan out of his relaxing daydream. He looked over to see his buddy Steve Ross plop down casually beside him.

“Just waiting for my dad and catching some rays,” he replied, trying to match Steve’s degree of cool.

They traded small talk for a minute or two, mostly about girls, then Steve said in a hushed tone, “Hey, look. It’s old Half-a-Deck!”

Ryan glanced up to see a man in a long coat and tattered wide-brim hat shuffling down the sidewalk. Like Steve, Ryan only knew the man by nickname everyone called him.

“Watch this,” Steve said. The class clown, he always had some gag device ready to whip out at a moment’s notice. He stood and extended his hand. “Put ‘er there, pal.”

The man grabbed the outstretched hand and was met by a shock from the buzzer Steve had hidden in his palm. He jumped back with a look of hurt in his eyes.

Ryan busted out laughing along with Steve, and the man turned and hurriedly hobbled off.

“What’s going on?” Ryan’s dad asked gruffly, emerging from the store.

Ryan quickly stifled his laughter.

“Oh man,” Steve said, giving his watch a bogus glance, “gotta run. See ya, Ryan.” He took off.

“What did you do to Earl?”

“Earl?” Ryan said, avoiding his dad’s intense stare. “You mean old Half-a-Deck? Just

Commented [1]: I would suggest introducing Ryan's dad's name here, as it appears later in the story!

Commented [HP2]: Throughout, I noticed details that placed the setting of the story within the 20th century--particularly the mention of the clock radio repair here and the slang the boys use. However, two elements feel a little discordant with this: Ryan and Steve calling Earl old, and that the accident happened in 1968. Let's say that this story is set in 1995 and assume that Earl was a high school senior when the car crash occurred--that means Earl would only be in his 40s when the boys call him old. For the timeline to make the most sense, I do think Earl should at least be in his mid to late 50s. This may call for reworking some of the details to bring the setting of the story into the 2000s. I've highlighted some of these "dated" details in blue so you can see what might need to be changed! See the assessment letter for more notes on this, especially regarding dialogue.

Commented [HP3]: I like this! It helps set up the idea that Ryan is trying to impress someone he thinks is cool, which explains some of his character arc throughout.

Commented [4]: This nickname was initially confusing to me as a reader, though the boys' attitudes indicated that it was derogatory. If this is a nickname that caught on with everyone over his name, Earl, I think I might suggest "Half Deck" instead. Taking out the extra syllable in the middle may help it flow better.

Commented [HP5]: Great description. Just this bit paints a picture of what kind of person Steve is.

having some fun, that's all.

"What did you call him?" his dad growled through clenched teeth.

Ryan knew he was in a tight spot, and he tried to find some wiggle room. "Hey, it's not just me," he argued. "Everyone calls him that." Then he smugly added, "You have to admit, the old guy isn't all there."

If looks could fry, Ryan would've been reduced to charcoal. He winced, knowing he'd struck a nerve. "Get in the car," his father ordered. "Now!"

Ryan huffed as he got into the car. His feelings vacillated between angry and worried as they drove. He knew he shouldn't have made that last comment to his dad, but he wasn't the one who caused all of this.

After traveling several blocks east, Cliff stopped the car in front of the city newspaper office. The Clarion was a beehive of activity, mostly with folks who had personal items to sell or local businesses trying to get their specials in before the deadline.

"Let's go."

Ryan got out of the car without asking questions and followed his father. They skirted around the line at the classified counter and took the stairs down to the archives. A man with a pure white beard got up from his desk and came to the counter when he saw them walk in.

"Cliff. It's been a while. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, Skip. Do you have any football highlights from '68?"

Skip seemed to know exactly what Cliff was looking for. Behind him were rows of newspaper-sized filing cabinets. He walked down an aisle marked 1965–1970 and disappeared.

A few minutes later, he returned with a paper from October 1968. "Here's the last one. I can't let you have it, but you're welcome to look through it over there." He pointed to a big square

Commented [HP6]: I don't know if "smug" is the right word to use for someone getting out of a "tight spot", although it depends on how Ryan's character is supposed to come across! Is he an actual jerk, or just an immature teenage boy?

table.

As he and his father sat down, Ryan finally broke the silence between them. “Dad, what are we doing here? What’s this all about?”

His dad thumbed through the paper, found the piece he was looking for, and pushed it in front of Ryan.

All-American Earl Cooper rushed for three touchdowns and caught a pass out of the backfield for another score as the Mustangs crushed Riverside 42–10 in this battle of unbeatens. Riverside had no answer for Cooper, who rumbled for a career-high 326 yards.

“Earl?” Puzzled, Ryan looked up at his father. “Half-a-Deck?”

Cliff folded the paper and returned it to Skip. “Come on,” he said, without looking at Ryan.

Ryan’s thoughts were all jumbled as he and his father left the newspaper office. *How could the man Steve pranked on the street be the same one who set records on the football field?*

Cliff and Ryan resumed their silence as they drove out of town, heading west. Three miles out, the highway curved sharply. Cliff found a safe place to pull off just past the bend. He motioned to Ryan and they both got out.

“Do you know where we are?” Cliff asked.

“Of course, I do.” Ryan pointed back toward the curve. “That’s Cooper’s—” The words caught in his throat as the realization hit him. “Bend,” he finally managed to say.

“That’s right,” Cliff said coldly. “Cooper’s Bend. It’s named after Earl Cooper, the man you and your friends call Half-a-Deck. On October 25, 1968, the night of that record-setting performance you just read about, Earl was driving back to town after taking his girlfriend home. They’d been out celebrating the win. Unfortunately, someone else had been celebrating, too. A drunk driver drifted into Earl’s lane. The driver of the other car died at the scene, and both of Earl’s

Commented [HP7]: I wonder if Ryan would continue using this nickname if it clearly made his dad so angry? It might be worth indicating that he starts to say it but doesn't finish or even swapping the order he says the names in. For example:

Puzzled, Ryan looked up at his father. "Half Deck? I mean--Earl?"

Commented [HP8]: This is a great moment in the story! I love the detail of the location name and how it hits Ryan.

legs and one of his arms were badly broken.” His voice softened. “Most devastating, though, was the brain trauma—the reason you and your friends call him that awful name.”

Dumbstruck, Ryan could only stare out the window as they drove back toward town. When his dad turned onto Watson Avenue, Ryan knew the lesson wasn’t over. A few blocks later they pulled up in front of a care center—a state facility.

Ryan took a deep breath. “Earl lives here, right?”

“That’s right. Earl has lived here since his parents died. He’s now a ward of the state. Let’s go.”

“Dad, we don’t have to go in there. I’ve seen enough to know that what Steve and I did was wrong.”

“Of course, you’re going in,” Cliff said with a sly smile. “How else will you be able to volunteer?”

Ryan went pale, and he felt as if there were a boulder on his back as he followed his father inside.

Cliff approached the front desk. “My son here wants to volunteer for two hours each Saturday for the next four weeks. How do we get the ball rolling?”

What! Ryan wanted to scream. His jaw dropped so far it nearly hit his chest. As they walked to the car, he argued, “Dad, I said I’m sorry. It was Steve’s fault. Why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not Steve’s father, I’m yours. And it’s my responsibility to teach you,” said Cliff.

“Someday I hope you’ll understand.”

They rode home in silence.

On Ryan’s first Saturday at the care center, Thanksgiving weekend, a massive storm dumped six

Commented [HP9]: I like that Ryan knows where the care center is, and possibly knew (or guessed) that Earl lives there! It feels realistic to growing up in a small town.

Commented [HP10]: This is a great moment! It feels like Ryan is really starting to understand his dad’s lesson here. However, his character arc feels a little broken from this moment on—see my first and second comment on page 5.

Commented [HP11]: This is an interesting thing for Cliff to say. So far, he’s been very strong in teaching Ryan this needed lesson. But this feels almost apologetic. I might suggest removing it or changing it to match Cliff’s previous tone.

Commented [HP12]: This collection of scenes where Cliff is teaching Ryan a lesson is well done.

Commented [HP13]: I’d love to see these Saturdays expanded a bit more into scenes like you did with the final Saturday. It would provide you more space to build Ryan’s character development, show more of Earl and his interaction with others (see comment on the “Reflections” section), and help even out the pacing of the story.

inches of snow on the ground. He spent the two hours shoveling walks, all the while cussing his dad. The weather had cleared by the following Saturday, and he was enlisted to wash windows. His third assignment was emptying trash cans and replacing the liners. Ryan's parents had instilled in him a sense of responsibility, so he tried to do a good job on each assignment. But he still resented his dad for making him be there in the first place. **The punishment was completely unjust—after all, he'd only been a bystander**

On Ryan's fourth and final Saturday, one of the regular kitchen workers was sick, so Ryan was assigned to fill in. Clearing dishes and wiping tables wasn't his idea of a good time, but it beat shoveling snow.

When he noticed Earl take a seat across the room, **Ryan knew what he had to do.** *Maybe Earl won't remember that day downtown,* Ryan thought as he approached. *Or maybe he doesn't know I was there.* **After all, it was Steve who'd pulled the prank.** But when Earl caught sight of him, he stiffened and turned away.

Ryan's heart broke. *There must be some way to let Earl know how sorry I am,* he thought. As he agonized over the situation, an idea struck him like lightning and he knew exactly how he could make things right.

Two days before Christmas, the clouds gave way to a beautiful December day. Ryan went downtown hoping to find Earl. He scoured every street in the business district and had almost given up when he finally spotted him, sitting on a bench facing the Christmas display in the window of Martin's Department Store. His concentration never broke as he focused on one particular figure in the Nativity scene. His eyes gleamed with pure love as he worshiped **Baby Jesus.**

Commented [HP14]: Why did Ryan know what he had to do? Was it because he was sorry or because he wanted to get his dad off his back?

Commented [15]: This feels like a very sudden change, as in the previous sentence Ryan still felt that he didn't have a part in what Steve did. To strengthen Ryan's character arc, it might help to take the moment earlier in the story, where Ryan says, "I've seen enough to know that what Steve and I did was wrong" and bring that doubt, guilt, or regret that Ryan is feeling through these descriptions of his volunteer work. I've highlighted two moments that feel the most discordant in Ryan's arc of character change in green.

Commented [16]: From a theological perspective, this is a little off. Even though Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas, he is no longer a baby. :) I would suggest removing "Baby" here. Or, if you want to retain the visual of Jesus as he is in the nativity, you could say, "His eyes gleamed with pure love as he worshiped Jesus in the manger."

Though Ryan hated to interrupt the reverent scene, he stepped forward and said, “Hello, Mr. Cooper.”

Commented [HP17]: I like how the respectful address here shows how Ryan has changed!

Earl tensed and wouldn’t look in Ryan’s direction.

Summoning all of his courage, Ryan cleared his throat. “Mr. Cooper, I’m sorry for what I did a few weeks ago. I hope you’ll forgive me.” He bent down and handed Earl a gift wrapped in bright Christmas paper. Earl’s face lit up, and he raised his eyes to meet Ryan’s.

Commented [HP18]: This could be an opportunity to add a little more character development. Does he know why he’s wrong/sorry? Developing the emotion more here will help the payoff of Ryan and Earl crying together be more impactful.

“Merry Christmas,” said Ryan. “Go ahead. Open it.”

Earl tore away the paper to reveal a shiny new football. Across the front were the words *Earl Cooper, All-American 1968*. As Earl examined the gift, turning it over and over, a tear trickled down his cheek. Then he hugged the ball tightly, and his tears flowed.

Ryan sat next to Earl, wrapped an arm around his broad shoulders, and cried with him. And in that moment, a warm feeling washed over Ryan and he knew his gift had been accepted—and not only by Earl.

Commented [HP19]: I like this ending for the story! It feels fitting, particularly for a Christmas story.

Commented [HP20]: Is a relationship with God important to Ryan? This could be an element to develop in his character earlier in the story, maybe during the volunteering scenes.

Reflections

One day when I was about fourteen, my dad and I were about to enter the local grocery store when Earl (not his real name) came up to us. Usually wearing a long coat and a battered hat, he was a fixture in our little town. On any given day, you were likely to find him walking the streets. Though older, he had the mind of a little child.

Commented [HP21]: This is a very interesting section! If called for by a certain publication, it’s a fine addition. However, normally I would encourage you to get rid of it, as I think it distracts from your main story. As soon as I read this portion, I had a few thoughts: First, “Earl (not his real name)” was a bit confusing and gave me pause. Second, now that I know it’s based on a real occurrence in your life, I’m suddenly a little more interested in the true story than the one you’ve just told. This is compounded by my third thought, which is that my favorite part of the reflection is the moral of “Give someone a battery this Christmas.” I like it so much, in fact, that I’m wondering why it wasn’t incorporated into the short story.

Earl, who had an intellectual disability, was fascinated by Dad’s hearing aids. Dad was legally deaf, but with the help of his powerful hearing aids, which were large and visible, he could hear some of the loudest sounds. Though he couldn’t let Earl handle his hearing aids, Dad reached into his pocket, pulled out a shiny new hearing-aid battery, and handed it to him. Earl looked up

You might want to consider doing that—removing the “Reflection” section but incorporating bits of the true story into Ryan’s story. You could possibly do this by showing Cliff’s (or someone else’s) kindness to Earl in contrast to the initial prank during an expanded volunteer scene.

at Dad and smiled. He looked at the battery and smiled again. Then he walked away admiring his new treasure.

A small thing, for sure, but it touched Earl's heart—and mine.

From time to time, we all need someone to reach into their pocket and give us battery. It might be as simple as a friendly smile, an encouraging word, a listening ear, or a helping hand.

Give someone a battery this Christmas.

Commented [HP22]: As I said above, I really love this!