

The abuse of power in montana 1948 by larry watson

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Edmund Burke once said, “ The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse.” In today’s society, power is taken and used in manipulative ways by prominent people in the public eye. We see celebrities pay their way out of punishments all the time. Julian Hayden is a powerful authoritarian character in Larry Watson’s novel, *Montana 1948*. He was the sheriff in Bantrook, and passed his job down to his son, Wesley, who is David’s father. His actions define how he abuses his power, using his authority over his family to control them and to try and cover up the crimes of his son, Frank.

Wesley Hayden is torn between his wife’s desire for him to be a lawyer and his father’s need for him to be the sheriff of Mercer County, passed down from him. He went to law school, but ultimately ended up being the sheriff. “ For a while she tendered hopes that I would follow in my father’s footsteps and pursue a career in law. ‘ Wouldn’t it be something,’ she once hopefully said to me when I was in my teens, ‘ Hayden and Son, Law Partners?’” (Watson 176). Near the beginning of the book, he introduces his father by saying, “ The sheriff of Mercer County was elected, but such was my grandfather’s influence - and the weight of the Hayden name. [...] It would never had occurred to my father to refuse” (Watson 9). Wes had no choice but to be the sheriff - or so he thinks. He has been overpowered by his father for his entire life, he wouldn’t have thought to make his own decisions.

Again, we see Julian’s influence over Wesley by seeing how his prejudice is “ like father, like son.” Both Wesley and Julian show their prejudice by saying racist things throughout the book, and trying to cover up Frank’s crimes. After the crimes take place, Len McAuley says to David, “ You know what

your granddad said it means to be a peace officer in Montana? He said it means knowing when to look and when to look away” (Watson 84). Julian is clearly biased over what kind of crimes he was willing to report, as well as Wesley. At first, he doesn’t want to report it, because Frank is his family. ““ That’s not the way it works. You know that. Sins- crimes- are not supposed to go unpublished’” (Watson 87). Gail persists that Wesley turns him in, and he ends up going against his father, locking Frank up in his own basement.

Grandpa and Grandma Hayden march up to Wes and Gail’s home, and demand that they know where Frank is. David watches all of this happen and thinks to himself, “ I suddenly felt sorry for my father – not as he stood before me at that moment, but as a boy. What must it have been like to have a father capable of speaking to you like that?” (Watson 108). David sees how aggressively his father is treated by his grandfather. He assumes that, as a child, Grandpa Hayden treated him this way. ““ You – investigating?’” In those two words I heard how little respect my grandfather had for my father and anything he did” (Watson 122). Again, Julian’s words reveal has clearly been overpowering over Wes his entire life, and how disrespectful he is towards Wes. He believes Wesley should live the way he wants him to.

Power can be used in all the right or wrong ways. In Montana 1948, Julian’s character plays a role in this story illustrates how power can be exploited, and even family can be manipulated for terrible purposes.