'Touch' captures the complexity, contradictions of young teens

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Maisie Willard, the story's main character, used to have friends. Until "bad stuff happened." Maisie was "molested, no, inappropriately touched" in the back of a school bus. Dissed by her classmates, she reaches the low point in her teenage life with two trips to the mall — one with her dull dentist-dad, the other with her stepmom, "the wicked witch." And then she learns how to move on.

Prose is especially adept at capturing the complicated and contradictory feelings of a pubescent 14-year-old. Living for a year with her mom and stepdad in Wisconsin, Maisie grows breasts, a "weird curvy ass" and gets periods. When she returns home, her friends — Kevin, Chris and Shakes — shoot her strange looks and sound "stiff and sort of phony," as if they were "talking to a girl."

Maisie enjoys resting her head on Shakes' shoulder and making out with him. But later, when all three boys ask to touch her, "it felt really creepy and made me hate them and hate myself, and hate my body."

With great insight (and a cathartic humor), Prose also engages the explosion of emotions surrounding divorce. Maisie hopes, of course, that her parents' re-marriages will self-destruct. She fantasizes that her stepmom and stepdad will run off together, leaving her mom and dad "to console each other, and maybe fall back in love." She learns, with the help of a therapist, that she's mad at her stepmom because she's mad at her mom — "and is afraid of those feelings."

"Touch" is tough, but Prose provides a soft landing. As she acknowledges what really happened on that bus, Maisie understands that relationships die all the time and new relationships are born. And that she really can become "a regular kid, like any other."

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