



BACKCOUNTRY

by Jenny Goebel • RELEASE DATE: Dec. 5, 2023

An adventurous scenario that nearly but doesn't quite achieve strong disability representation.

Thirteen-year-old Em and her diabetic alert dog face the dangerous Colorado wilderness alone.

While playing in a championship volleyball match, Em starts to feel sick. She pushes through so she won't disappoint Dad, who only seems interested in her when she's playing sports. More importantly, Em doesn't want him canceling their upcoming backcountry cross-country ski trip, her chance to show him that she's fun to be around outside of sports. But everything changes when she learns that she has Type 1 diabetes. Em's matched with black lab Molly, a diabetic alert dog, who Dad says can

join them on their trip. However, a whiteout separates Em and Molly from Dad, who falls and breaks his leg. They make it to a cabin, and with Dad sheltering, Em risks everything to go find help with Molly by her side—even though her supply of insulin was damaged. The book attempts to walk the fine line between perpetuating the trope of the “inspirational disabled person” and presenting a character who displays intrepid adaptability while honoring her own limitations. Em’s internalized ableism is heartbreaking, however, perhaps because the compressed timeline—a matter of months between her diagnosis and the trip—doesn’t allow for in-depth, nuanced processing on her part. Em eventually realizes she can still live a “normal” life, but ultimately, it feels as though it’s *despite* her diabetes rather than because disability *is* normal. Main characters read white.

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