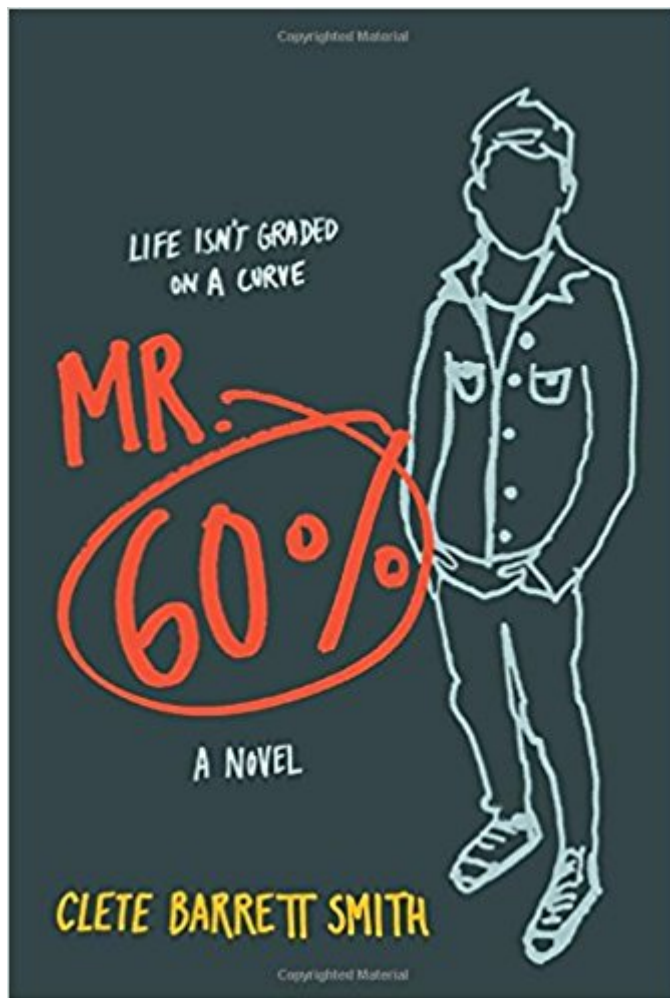




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Mr. 60%



Synopsis

Witty, honest, and wholly captivating, *Mr. 60%* is a perfect read for fans of *The Spectacular Now* and *Where Things Come Back*. *Mr. 60%* Matt Nolan is the high school drug dealer, deadbeat, and soon-to-be dropout according to everyone at his school. His vice principal is counting down the days until *Mr. 60%* (aka Matt) finally flunks out and is no longer his problem. What no one knows is the only reason Matt sells drugs is to take care of his uncle Jack, who is dying of cancer. *Mr. 60%* Meet Amanda. The overly cheerful social outcast whose optimism makes Matt want to hurl. Stuck as partners during an after-school club (mandatory for Matt), it's only a matter of time until Amanda discovers Matt's secret. But Amanda is used to dealing with heartbreak, and she's determined to help Matt find a way to give life 100 percent.

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Customer Reviews

Clete Barrett Smith is the author of the middle-grade *Intergalactic Bed & Breakfast* series (*Aliens on Vacation*, *Alien on a Rampage*, and *Aliens in Disguise*), as well as *Magic Delivery*. A lifelong resident of the Pacific Northwest, Smith taught English, drama, and speech at the high school level while continuing to write. You can follow him on Facebook, on Twitter (@CleteSmith), and online at cletebarrettsmith.com.

One *Mr. 60%* Matt Nolan kept his head bent low as he walked toward the front doors of the high school. A sophomore stepped in front of him. Matt could see the tip of a fifty-dollar bill clutched in

the sophomore "Hey," the sophomore said. "I, uh, I heard that you--"

Matt shook his head once. "Not here."

The sophomore stopped. Matt didn't break stride. The sophomore stared for a moment at the money in his hand, then jogged to catch up.

"But I heard that you--"

"Not here." Matt jerked his head in the direction of the security camera mounted over the front doors. He pushed through. The sophomore followed, staying a few paces behind.

Matt wound his way between the tables in the student commons, settling into a chair in the corner behind a pillar. The sophomore moved to join him.

"Don't sit down."

"Okay."

The sophomore shuffled his feet and looked around as the commons filled with students from the morning buses. He thrust the money at Matt.

"Here, I--"

"Put that away."

"Okay."

He jammed the money into his pocket. "Okay."

He shuffled from side to side.

"So . . . how do I . . . "

"Fifty."

Matt kept his gaze on the table. "How much you got?"

"A hundred."

"But I don't know you. First time."

"But I don't have--"

"Then get the fuck away from me."

The sophomore rubbed his palms on his jeans. He glanced over at a table where a group of his friends sat, watching him.

"Okay. Okay, a hundred. I've got it. I can get it."

"You will never hand me money."

Matt continued speaking to the table. "The john on the third floor. Last stall. That's your spot. Tuck the cash behind the metal casing that holds the toilet paper. Has to be there by noon."

It was quiet for a minute. "We're done now."

"Okay. Yeah. But how do I--"

"You'll have it by the end of the day."

Eventually the sophomore drifted away, toward the staircase, looking over at the administrative offices with deliberate casualness.

During first period the police officer assigned to the school pulled Matt out of class. Walked right into the middle of Hanoran's Remedial English lecture and called Matt's name. Matt was out of his last-row chair and through the door of the classroom before anyone had a chance to notice he had ever been there. He walked ahead of the police officer through the empty hallways, directing himself to the officer's cubbyhole on the first floor. The officer had to increase the length of his strides to keep up.

Matt dropped his backpack on the table, spread his legs to shoulder width and raised his arms. The police officer patted him down, arms, then torso, then legs from ankle to crotch.

Afterward he unzipped the backpack and rifled through the contents. “You ever get tired of this, Hershey?” The officer sighed. He zipped up the bag and handed it to Matt. “See you soon.”

During sixth period Matt took a bathroom break from Basic Algebra and walked to Mr. Fitzsimmons’s classroom on the second floor, past the library storage rooms and the custodial services closet. The nearly retired Fitzsimmons could be counted on to use his prep period to sneak a cigarette break in the teachers’ parking lot. He never locked his classroom.

Matt entered the room and crossed to the projector stand in the corner. The projector was coated with a fine layer of dust. It wasn’t even plugged into the computer. Matt flipped open a compartment in the back, reached in and withdrew a small ziplock bag. It contained a variety of pills plus a few buds of high-grade marijuana and was known around school as a party bag.

Matt slipped it up the sleeve of his faded sweatshirt.

After school, Matt approached the sophomore in the crowded hallway from behind, paused briefly, then walked on by.

“Hey,” the sophomore said. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Matt stopped and turned. The sophomore had two friends with him. They stared, wide-eyed, at Matt.

“So when do--”

“Tell them to leave.”

The sophomore’s friends needed no further invitation and scurried away.

“So when do I get--”

“It’s in your backpack.”

The sophomore’s eyes went wide.

“Really?”

Matt didn’t answer stupid questions. For the first time, he looked at the sophomore, pinning him down with a stare right in the eyes.

“You know what happens if you mention my name to Gill? If you get caught with it?”

The sophomore swallowed. He nodded. Everyone knew what happened if you ratted out Matt Nolan to the vice principal. Some people swore you could still make out the bloodstains in the back parking lot from last year.

Matt turned and walked through the commons and out the front door.

Two

On the way home from school, Matt stopped by the FeelRite Pharmacy. He had to check each aisle to find what he was looking for.

He tucked the box under one arm and stood at the end of the aisle, peering at the cashier’s station, blocked from sight by a revolving stand of used paperbacks. He waited for a Latina woman with four children to finish buying a carry-cart full of medicines and snacks.

When they left, he stepped toward the cashier. An elderly woman came through the front doors then, and Matt stepped back into his hiding place. She fumbled through her purse for a receipt and mumbled something to the cashier, who kept leaning forward to ask her.

“What?”

Matt cursed under his breath. He scanned the parking lot through the front windows for any more arrivals. He didn’t want

witnesses. When the old woman finally shuffled away, Matt approached the cashier and put his box on the counter. The FeelRite Portable Toilet for Adults. The picture on the box looked like an oversized toddler's potty on stilts. Matt laid two fifty-dollar bills on top of the box, his scowl silently daring the cashier to make a smartass remark. Three When Matt walked through the entrance to the trailer park he passed a circle of middle-aged men lounging around a sagging picnic table, empty beer bottles scattered at their feet. One of them shouted to Matt, "Hey, my man. You got any free samples today?" This got a chuckle from the rest of the group. "Yeah, brother," said someone else, his white tank top yellowed by nicotine and neglect. "I got to tell Unemployment I at least tried lookin' for a job today. You doin' any hiring for your little business?" More laughs. Matt lifted his head in recognition but just passed on by. He never sold to any of those guys. They were always broke, for one thing, and for another thing, you don't shit where you eat. The door of the trailer often stuck in the frame and he had to jostle it open. The interior of trailer #6 consisted of a small kitchen/living room, a narrow hallway, a tiny bathroom and one bedroom. Spilling out of a recliner and sprawled across the coffee table was a man in a bathrobe. Eyes closed, head lying at an odd angle on the table, mouth open and tongue hanging to the side. It was easy to see the shape of his bones wherever exposed flesh peeked through the holes in his bathrobe. He was perfectly still. Matt ignored the man and walked to the kitchen area. He grabbed a box of Cinnamon Pop-Tarts, put one in the toaster and chewed on another. The man slowly opened one eye. Matt pretended not to notice. The man closed his eye and began to moan, a guttural sound from deep within his chest. "That's not funny anymore," Matt said. The moan rose to a horrible crescendo, melding into a series of exaggerated warbles and gagging noises. When it was over the man opened both eyes and chuckled. "That was my death rattle. How'd you like it?" His toothy grin covered his entire face. "That's not funny anymore." "Ah, t'fuck hell with you. You never had a sense of humor." "When you were two hundred pounds, playing dead was funny, Jack." Matt took the Pop-Tart out of the toaster and bit into it. "Not anymore." Jack used both hands to smooth down what was left of his red-going-gray hair. He pulled himself up into the recliner. When he got upright a spasm of coughing seized his body. He lowered his head and pounded on his knee until the coughing fit passed, then spat into a dirty ashtray. "You got any smokes?" "Those things'll kill you." "Oh, now who's the comedian? Come on, where'd you hide 'em? I ain't so sick I can't still whip yer ass if

I feel like it. Matt balled up his paper towel plate and chucked it in the garbage can. "You couldn't take me in your best days," he said, but he reached on top of the fridge for a pack of unfiltered Camels. He tossed it across the room. "Thanks," Jack said, lighting up his cigarette with a slightly shaking hand. "Tell me something, when are you gonna bring a girl over here? Don't you think I get tired a just lookin' at you every day? Don't you make any girlfriends at that school?" "You couldn't handle my girlfriends. If even one of them walked in here all the blood you have left would rush to your dong and you'd drop dead. For real this time." Jack tilted his head back and blew a stream of blue-gray smoke at the ceiling. "But what a way to go." The two shared a silence while Jack smoked. Matt drummed his fingers on the kitchen table and took a deep breath. "Jack? I have something for you, but you're not gonna like it." "That right? I'm getting a lot of things I don't like lately." Matt slid the box from the bag and set it on the coffee table. He let Jack read the words for himself. "Oh, no," Jack said. "No, no. Hell, no." He started to push himself out of his seat but collapsed in another fit of coughing. When he was finished, Matt said, "Look, just use it at night, okay? Just at night. That's all I'm asking. I'll put it right by your bed." "Hell, I don't need that." Jack kicked at the box but missed and knocked the ashtray off the coffee table. He swore and rubbed his ankle. "Dammit, Matt, I still remember when you first used one a them things." Jack suddenly smiled again. "First time, know what you did? I was watching football with a couple a buddies, it's overtime, and you run in hollerin', 'Come look what I done, Uncle Jack. Come look.' You was so proud I thought you must a shit a solid gold brick." Jack's eyes crinkled up and his shoulders shook with laughter. "Hell, you wouldn't shut up until I went and looked at it. And don't think I didn't take a load of crap from my buddies, neither. Pun certainly intended." Jack's shoulders stilled, his smile faded. He shook his head and his sigh drained the rest of the color from his face. "And now you want me to use it?" He looked away from the box, denying its existence with his selective line of vision. "Just at night," Matt said. The silence stretched between them. Matt finally stood up, grabbed the box and marched it down the hallway and into the bedroom. When he returned, Jack said, "You wanna play some cards? Get yer ass whipped by an old man with one foot in the grave and the other on a wet banana peel?" He chuckled, but it was getting harder every

day to distinguish between his laughter and the wheezing sound he made after coughing.

"Sure. Let's play."

"I've been at this twenty-seven years and you're the most consistent student I've ever seen." Mr. Marsh, the counselor, spread Matt's first-semester report cards on his desk. "Basic Algebra, 60.3 percent. Earth Science, 60.2. Business English, 61.1. Metal Shop, 60.5. US History, 60.7. It's uncanny. How do you explain it?"

Matt shrugged. "I'm serious, Matt. How do you manage to exert the absolute bare minimum effort required to pass? In every discipline we offer?"

The silence was heavy and hung there for over a minute.

"These are not rhetorical questions," Matt looked at the desk. "They'll give me a diploma that looks just like everyone else's."

"Ahhh, not so fast." Mr. Marsh pulled a paper from the top drawer of his desk. "Not so fast. That's why I asked you to come see me. The school board passed a new rule last night. You hear about it?"

Matt shook his head.

"I don't get to as many meetings as I would like."

"No problem. I have a copy of the minutes right here."

Mr. Marsh cleared his throat and read,

"In an effort to ensure that all students are on a path to well-rounded citizenship after graduation, each senior will be required to join at least one extracurricular club during his or her final year of high school."

Matt scoffed.

"Well?" Mr. Marsh said.

"They can't do that."

"They can. They have."

The door of Mr. Marsh's office opened and Vice Principal Gill stuck his head into the room. He looked over Matt's head to the counselor.

"Did you tell him?"

Mr. Marsh nodded.

"And is he going to drop out?"

Saying it just like that, like Matt wasn't in the room.

"We're getting there, Mr. Gill."

Mr. Marsh looked back at Matt.

"This rule takes effect immediately, so you need to ."

Mr. Gill remained in the doorway, watching. Mr. Marsh fixed him with a stare.

"Is there anything else I can help you with right now? Or should I get back to the conversation I was having with this student?"

Gill glared at Mr. Marsh but shut the door.

Mr. Marsh sighed.

"Matt, Mr. Gill there thinks the only reason you show up at school at all is to have access to customers. Even if he can't prove it."

Matt said nothing.

"But at least you're technically passing. And you're right about one thing. If you join a club and keep those grades above sixty percent, you do indeed get a diploma, on official school paper and

everything. Does that mean anything to you?" "I don't know," Matt shrugged. "I don't know." "I know it's the biggest cliché in the counselor handbook, but where do you see yourself in five years? What are you going to have to do to get there?" "Thinking about the future was like staring into a dark cave. Matt remained silent." Mr. Marsh sighed. "I checked out all the clubs. And I mean all of them. There's only one that you're qualified to join, especially at this late date. Helping Hands. It's a community service club. They meet in room 212."

I wanted to love this book and give it 5 stars, but although I could see why Matt Nolan was the high school drug dealer and he struggled in school due to his hardships at home, I didn't really connect with him. Yes, everyone at his school KNEW he was dealing drugs but he really got almost zero help and no adults dug into his home life beyond school. Drug dealing was glossed over too easily with no consequences outside of school. Meeting Amanda at his after school punishment club duty didn't really come off as genuine and Matt never really sat down and became friends with her on any level except for taking care of his sick uncle. This made the book overly heavy and depressing when we all know death is a part of life and I would have liked a bit more optimism. I did enjoy the ending because it seemed like Matt finally decided to claim his life and start living which was the whole point of the book so it did wrap up nicely.

Sometimes a story will just get under your skin and tug at your heart. Sometimes you won't even see it coming. That's what happened with Mr. 60%. First, let me say I love this title. It's unique, memorable and it has an important meaning to the story, which always makes me happy. A title that has a clear connection to the story is one of my favorite things ever! When I started reading Mr. 60%, I was immediately hit by a sense of familiarity. I've recently finished another YA book that had a teen drug dealer and an overweight girl as the two main characters, Trust by Kylie Scott. Soon enough, though, I learned these two books were worlds apart. They were both great, but the tone and narrative were completely different. While Trust is a clear romance-focused book, Mr. 60%'s message is more about dealing with loss, finding hope and surrounding yourself with good people. And, dude, this book is filled with genuinely good people as characters. The school counselor, Mr. Marsh, for example, is a good, good man. I wish there were more people like him in the world. More people like him working at schools all over the world. The way he didn't push, but was still there for Matt was brilliant. He's

a clear example of a person who isn't willing to give up because he wants to make a difference, and he knows how to make a difference. People often get themselves lost in their need to help because they don't know what to do, but I believe there are many folks out there that are level-headed like Mr. Marsh, and those are the people who should be around teenagers and helping them find their way. Mr. Marsh was a side character, but the amount of love and appreciation I have for him isn't small at all. I think I only loved him less than I did Amanda, because there's no competing with that girl. Amanda will be a phenomenal nurse one day and yes, I'm talking about her as if she was a real person. Deal with it. I absolutely loved how good and pure and genuine and pretty much perfect she was. She didn't have anything to gain by helping. There were no promises. No guarantees. She simply did because she wanted to and because she saw someone in need of help. I loved how easy it was for her to fit into Matt and Jack's life, as if she belonged. And she did. It was all so cohesive and easy and warm. THE FEELS! Now to Matt and Uncle Jack. Man. The tears. The freaking tears. I have to say that one of my favorite things about this was how these two characters were flawed, but they still charmed me and made me feel so much for them. Uncle Jack wasn't this perfect father figure, but he was still a father to Matt. A good father and a good uncle and a good man, even though it was implied he'd done some shady things in the past. Same for Matt. He was a freaking drug dealer, so he was far from a conventional good guy. He broke the law left and right, and I'm not even sure if it was all because of his uncle's situation or if he would've gone down that path anyway. But Matt was a lost kid who'd gotten the short end of the stick when it came to life in general, and it seemed like Mr. Marsh only needed a little bit of light (Amanda) and guidance (Mr. Marsh) to find a way out of that hole. While Matt did questionable things, I still wanted to hug him. I wanted to be Amanda's mom and hug him real tight because he gave me something I need when I read books. He gave me the kind of priceless dynamic I want to see in every story when it came to his relationship with his uncle. I want to see characters who care about each other even when they're not throwing I love yous around. People who'll care for each other and be there when needed. People who'll sacrifice and hurt and make me cry. I'm not a crier, but this book reduced me to a crying mess. I should've known better to read the final chapters on the bus. So while this was a quiet read with no romance (yeah, sorry, but Amanda and Matt are perfectly platonic) yeah, I said perfect, and I'm the biggest romance fan

ever), it gave me more than I needed. More than I expected when I started reading. It gave me hope that somewhere out there *“Amandas”* and *“Mr. Marshs”* will find their *“Matt”* and help them out of the dark.

I had such high expectations for this book. The title, *Mr. 60%*, was the first thing that got my attention. Then I read the premise *“ALL THE FEELS.”* Sadly I ended up having a lot of mixed feelings. There were some good things about this book, but it just didn't WOW me like I thought it would. My main problem with this book is the characters. I had such a difficult time connecting with the characters. I like Amanda a lot in the beginning. She's an outcast, but always so happy and bubbly. She doesn't let anything or anyone stop her from doing what she loves. Even when she's rejected and hurt, she still finds a way to keep going. I admired that about her. BUT halfway through there was just something off about her. I can't pinpoint what it was, but she came off maybe way too optimistic? I did like Matt but I just didn't care all that much about him. I don't know why I mean I feel like I should. His life is such a big mess. Everyone thinks he won't succeed. He has to resort to selling drugs just to keep up with bills and medical expenses. Then there's his uncle, Jack, whose condition is never going to get better and you know the worst is coming at any moment. It's completely depressing and I'm such an emotional person I should have felt *“IT.”* I can watch a show halfway through or know nothing about it, but when I see a heartbreaking situation where the characters are crying I almost always will tear up. This type of stories hit me hard BUT UGHHHHH this one didn't. The plot had potential.. a lot of it, but it just kind of felt flat for me. Cancer is a very sensitive issue. Like I said, I was hoping for that FEELS and barely got any. The writing was just okay for me. I did like that the book was easy to read. I breezed through it in less than 24 hours and couldn't put it down. That's a good thing I think. Or maybe, I just kept going because I was looking for something more. It also felt like the storytelling was missing something. I don't know I'm honestly kicking myself right now because I can't wrap my

mind around why this book did not work for me. Oh and that ending didn't even get me started. It felt rushed and unfinished. I thought there was an epilogue or something, but nope. It was seriously so frustrating. As disappointing as this was for me, there were a few things I did really like like the relationships, the humor, and the title. I like Matt's relationship with Jack and I thought it was really admirable what Matt was doing for his uncle. They bickered a lot, but you can tell how deeply they cared about each other. I also really like that Matt and Amanda stayed friends throughout the story. I'm usually all for romance and thought Matt and Amanda are just great for each other, but it's nice to see boy-girl platonic relationships cause YES boys and girls do not always have to have romantic feelings for each other. Boys and girls can be best friends and just that. I also really enjoyed the sense of humor in this book. The bantering between Matt, Jack and Amanda was refreshing, amusing and endearing. That was definitely a big plus! And the title! I just really love the title. Matt is called "Mr. 60%" for a reason it's quite sad really, but I thought it was pretty clever. Overall, I don't dislike this book, but it definitely did not work for me. I think that Mr. 60% by Clete Barrett Smith is a decent story with the potential to be amazing and is probably that to other readers, but it just felt dull for me. Maybe I just went into this expecting to feel something and when I didn't, I ended up being so disappointed that I couldn't relate to the characters and story anymore. At least I didn't DNF it and some parts were entertaining. I received an advanced reader copy of this book from the publisher, Crown Books for Young Readers, via NetGalley in exchange for a fair review. All thoughts and opinions are my own. To read more of my reviews, visit [sincerelykarenjo \[dot\] wordpress \[dot\] com](http://sincerelykarenjo.wordpress.com)

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