A Business Tale: A Story of Ethics, Choices, Success (and a Very Large Rabbit)

In “A Business Tale,” Marianne Jennings illustrates the convoluted world of ethics through the eyes of Edgar Benchley. In many ways, Edgar is exactly like most of us. He is often tempted to cut corners, side step rules, and look the other way when faced with moral injustice. In Edgar’s case, however, there is one significant differentiating factor. A gigantic rabbit named Ari, “short for Aristotle.” Ari is really a metaphor that can be interpreted to represent Edgar’s conscience.

The story begins when Edward is just a boy. His eccentric mother, Vera, is little more than a road sign for what Edgar should not do. She spins tales, speeds incessantly, and generally ignores the guidelines of life as a rule. Ari appears to steer him in the right direction. Initially, the subjects of guidance are childhood matters, but they eventually progress through college into adulthood. Throughout this time Edgar is tempted to cheat on tests, lie and generally be untrue to himself. Ari initially persuades him through a combination of stern disapproval and swatting rabbit feet, but as time continues Edgar begins to feel a sense of pride when doing the right thing.

Edgar grows up with a close circle of three friends, Drew, Heather and Steve. His friends do not follow the same righteous path. They purchase term papers, avoid doing hard work, and look the other way when confronted with moral career dilemmas. For the majority of the book they spend their time on easy street, far ahead of poor, character-laden Edgar.

Edgar’s path is anything but easy. Edgar learns the hard way that doing the right thing is difficult. After leaving school he takes a job working for his friend Drew. Shortly thereafter he
discovers accounting fraud. Realizing this could eventually place the firm in jeopardy, he speaks up. Drew advises him to be a “team player” and not to “rock the boat”. Edgar then proceeds to the Vice President, and finally the CEO. He is promptly fired. From then on, his friend refuses to speak with him.

He works in a toll booth for many years until Heather takes pity on him and hires him as her personal assistant. Heather runs a stock trading compliance program. He works there for around a year and a half before he realizes that while the program is legit, Heather herself is engaging in insider trading. Concerned with his reputation once this is discovered, he quietly leaves his position and returns to the toll booth.

The last of his tight circle of three, Steve, finally hires Edgar to help him arrange the launch of his new company and product. Edgar soon learns that the product is flawed, and could even cause possible physical harm to many if its consumers. He goes to his friend, pleading with him to delay the launch of the new product but is refused. He leaves, once again.

Finally, however, his tedious path pays off. Edgar starts his own company, fixing the products Steve manufactured. He lays in wait and then purchases the company when liability lawsuits force him to file bankruptcy. All three of his friends end up broke or incarcerated for their parts in shady business deals, and Edgar becomes the owner of a successful multimillion dollar company.

Unfortunately we can’t all have a giant, snobby and entertaining rabbit named Ari, but we can all draw some very worthy life lessons from the story of Edgar. While his story is one of tough choices and huge dramatic setbacks, so are most careers in the business world when a person moves against the current. It’s a dog eat dog world. Firms are concerned first and foremost with numbers and results, with ethics almost never making its way into boardroom discussions. Yet without ethics, businesses and even entire economies can eventually collapse. Just look at the financial situation in which we currently find our country. There is no better example than the recession we currently find in America. The consistent deception of Walls Street giants such
as Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco caused huge financial meltdowns. The misleading practices of mortgage institutions caused many homeowners to buy homes they truly could not afford. Rampant insider trading and cultural acceptance of greed rendered our entire financial system so unstable it nearly came crashing down before our very eyes.

This presents business people with a unique paradox. While financial success is always the prevailing goal of the business world, it also carries inherent responsibility. This responsibility is to respect yourself and others through fair, honest business transactions even when faced with heavy external pressures to the contrary. Inherent as well, in the responsibility to speak up when situations are less than morally sound. An executive must be prepared to show leadership when placed in difficult situations, even when the consequences are long-term.

This was an interesting and thought provoking story. I would recommend this novel to any person pursuing a business career. The author cleverly entwines modern real world scenarios such as insider trading, accounting fraud and liability concerns with time-tested fable symbolism. Edgar can be seen as the tortoise, slowly making his solid, steady path to success. He even owns the company “Tortoise Enterprises.” His friends are constantly cheating to skip ahead and eventually end up in dire straits. Not only is the story good, but the author is also highly entertaining in her descriptions of Ari, as well as the character portrayal of Vera Benchley.

There was one facet of the book of which I did not particularly approve, however, regarding the final situation Edgar faced with Steve’s defective product. The item is portrayed as carcinogenic, possibly causing cancer, and yet Edgar allows him to produce these items, even creates a company benefiting from their repair. I would have expected him to report this information to protect public health. The situation was left in a grey area, so it is possible the author wished you to infer it was only a possible contributing factor, rather than a cause. It would have been more consistent with Edgar’s character though if he had at least confirmed this fact for the reader.
Still, this novel was a superior read. It incorporates creative story telling with logical principles and the everyday challenges. Edgar embodies the human struggle to remain steadfast in a chaotic, greed driven world, and Ari will keep you chuckling the entire way.