

The Gay & Lesbian Review

WORLDWIDE

MARCH-APRIL 2010

\$4.95 USA and Canada

The Boys in the Short Play

JOHN DENNIS ANDERSON

Sugarless

by James Magruder

Terrace Books, University of Wisconsin. 268 pages, \$24.95

SUGARLESS, James Magruder's juicy, fruity new novel, is a 70's coming-of-age story that combines the heady flavor of adolescent hormones with original cast albums and high school speech competitions. The result is a tart rite of passage into gay adulthood that's not at all saccharine but packs a surprisingly potent emotional punch.

Trapped in the western Chicago suburbs with his divorced, remarried mother and a blended family, Rick Lahrem describes himself as "cautious, featureless, a bus stop stand-alone holding his breath, beneath anyone's notice." His speech teacher, though, notices him when he makes two girls cry in class with his oral inter-

39

pretation of a tear-jerking short story called "The Scarlet Ibis." Recruited for the speech team in his sophomore year, Rick is assigned to compete in an event called D.I., or Dramatic Interpretation. He is given a scene from the play *The Boys in the Band*. Rick plays two characters, Michael and Alan, in an emotional confrontation toward the end of the Mart Crowley play, by switching focal points and voices. Rick succeeds to the point that he attracts the attention of the gay speech coach of a rival school, Ned Bolang, one of the judges at Rick's first tournament. They later meet by accident while perusing original cast recordings in a record store.

Rick, it seems, has a secret, guilty passion for original cast albums (as well as for his friend Steve's uncut penis), and Ned Bolang becomes Rick's tutor in all things musical and gay. Telling this story of jailbait sex from Rick's point of view, Magruder traces the giddy, poignant process of sexual maturation, and he also invites the reader to infer the thirty-ish Ned's complicated, bittersweet perspective on a taboo relationship with a high school sophomore.

The fairly explicit sex scenes in this unusual bildungsroman might render it unsuitable for some young adult readers. Magruder has captured gay teenage sexuality with frankness and sensitivity. I only wish I'd been able to read it when I was going through some of the same transitions, though I doubt if I could have fully appreciated Magruder's clear-sightedness about Rick's journey of self-discovery.

During the school year that the novel covers, in addition to his burgeoning sexuality, Rick must also cope with his mother and stepsister becoming born-again religious zealots, an important element of the plot. Although amusing and bristling with on-the-nose satire, these domestic passages of the novel are more predictable in the way they play out than Rick's extracurricular activities. Also easily recognizable but still well drawn is Rick's relationship with his father and new stepmother. Magruder connects these diverse narrative strands in various artful ways, though, so we never lose sight of Rick's adolescent schooling in lessons of infatuation, betrayal, and survival.

One particularly satisfying thread running through the story is Rick's changing sense of the scene from *The Boys in the Band* that takes him to the final round of the Illinois state speech contest. At first, performing the scene between Michael and Alan is a mechanical exercise for Rick in which he uses figurines of two American presidents on a shelf to help him focus on the two characters. In stages, though, he realizes how his own desires fuel his performance, how viscerally the subject matter pushes the buttons of conservative judges and classmates, and how Michael has always loved Alan and that Alan finds him out in the scene. "Beneath the surface of my performance," Rick realizes, "was that I had found me out in it. By the time we got to state I was a sixteen-year-old telling my truth."

In a brief coda, Magruder jumps to the present to provide Rick's adult perspective on the events of the novel that took place in the 1976-77 school year. The astringent ending of Magruder's impressive and highly entertaining first novel leave us eager for his next work of fiction.

John Dennis Anderson teaches oral interpretation and performance studies at Emerson College. Author of Student Companion to William Faulkner (2007), he performs nationally as Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Washington Irving, Henry James, and Lynn Riggs.