

THE WORLD OF NORMAL BOYS BY K.M. SOEHNLEIN

THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE BESTSELLER

THE WORLD OF NORMAL BOYS

Winner of
the Lambda
Literary
Award

A NOVEL



"This first novel is so eloquent because it is hellbent on collaring the reader and telling him or her the whole passionate story."
—Edmund White, author of *The Married Man*

"This is a rich and unflinching book."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

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"This is a rich and unflinching book." --The New York Times Book Review

"Extraordinary...an exhilarating experience...that Soehnlein has produced as his first novel a work of such maturity and excellence is little short of astounding." --Fenton Johnson, author of *Scissors, Paper, Rock*

The time is the late 1970s--an age of gas shortages, head shops, and Saturday Night Fever. The place, suburban New Jersey. At a time when the teenagers around him are coming of age, Robin MacKenzie is coming undone. While "normal boys" are into cars, sports, and bullying their classmates, Robin enjoys day trips to New York City with his elegant mother, spinning fantastic tales for her amusement in an intimate ritual he has come to love. He dutifully plays the role of the good son for his meat-and-potatoes father, even as his own mind is a jumble of sexual confusion and painful self-doubt. But everything changes in one, horrifying instant when a tragic accident wakes his family from their middle-American dream and plunges them into a spiral of slow destruction.

As his family falls apart day by day, Robin finds himself pulling away from the unquestioned, unexamined life that has been carefully laid out for him. Small acts of rebellion lead to larger questions of what it means to stand on his own. Falling into a fevered triangle with two other outcasts, Todd Spicer and Scott Schatz, Robin embarks on an explosive odyssey of sexual self-discovery that will take him beyond the spring-green lawns of suburbia, beyond the fraying fabric barely holding together his quickly unraveling family, and into a complex future, beyond the world of normal boys.

"Karl Soehnlein's stunning first novel reads like a cross between the film *American Beauty* and Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*." --The Advocate

"The World of Normal Boys is a work of authenticity, as relevant to those who lived a similar coming-of-age experience many years ago as it will be to those who are living that experience now." --Bay Area Reporter

"An amusingly detailed and largely accurate picture of life in the Jersey 'burbs." --Publishers Weekly

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1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Brilliant, brittle, harrowing, and ultimately painfully close to home.e.

By Ulysses Dietz

I am just ten years older than Robin, the central character in "The World of Normal Boys." I grew up in Syracuse, New York, but I've lived, with my partner, for the last 32 years in the very New Jersey suburbs where this novel is set - and where the author grew up.

The truth in this book is unflinching, the writing is crystalline, the characters are painful in their reality. The traumas in my life as a teenager sometimes echoed Robin's (I lost a younger brother at 13, an older sister at

16; and the gradual terror of self-discovery will resonate with anyone who ever went through it. You can believe what Soehnlein says. With a poetic simplicity, Soehnlein's prose pulls you into Robin's heart and mind. He will frustrate you, he will frighten you, and ultimately, he will make you wish you could rescue him.

But he's a strong boy, as he himself learns in the course of this story, which barely covers six months in his young life.

The most chilling thing in the book was how much I related to Dorothy and Clark: as the parent of two teenagers, I have the eerie sensation of seeing through both ends of this particular telescope. The vast gulf of understanding between parents and their teenage children is something that all the years since the late 1970s have done nothing to erase - much as we have tried.

I was moved and inspired by Soehnlein's writing, and by his narrative skills. I can't wait to pick up the sequel, "Robin & Ruby."

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

THE World of Normal Boys - a novel about hope

By Edward F. Corson

I first read "The World of Normal Boys" last year, and I liked it a lot. Upon re-reading it, I agree that it's kind of depressing, unsettling, but also realistic. Remember that this is set in the 1970s. How much did your average gay 13yo then know about Stonewall, for instance?

I can easily imagine a young 1970s boy who knows he attracted to boys, is consumed with guilt on multiple fronts, has virtually no positive role models, jerks off a lot, and gets slapped around by everybody. But does this make for a good novel? Well, I suppose that not every coming-of-age story has to be life-affirming and love-affirming. What Robin thinks, what he does, are wholly believable from a 13yo's point of view. At the same time, I don't think I'd want to be Robin, no matter what decade it is -- even if I *did* get to say "screw you" and ride off into the sunset at the end.

Robin has, or ends up having, an antagonistic relationship with almost everyone in his life. The only "nice people" are his guidance counselor, Mr. Cortez, and Vincent, the Greenwich Village trick who gives Robin bus fare for sex. But take the other characters: Robin's father is the personification of clueless fatherhood, Robin's mentoring mother has given over to drink, brother Jackson (until his demise) is a bullying brat, sister Ruby and grandmother Nana are ridiculously religious, Grandpa Leo was a drunk, uncle Stan is a dork, cousin Larry is a total prick, and both buds Todd Spicer and Scott Schatz turn out to be losers who, for unknown reasons, like to get their rocks off (indiscriminately) with other guys. Lest I forget Mr. Schatz, the drunken child abuser. So, Robin is awash in negativity. Even Mr. Cortez is clueless about why 13yo Robin has to ditch school.

I think the main shtick in this novel is not homosexuality or parents or friends, or 13yos. It's Jackson's injury. It's the granddaddy metaphor for dashed hopes. Robin's story is filled with dashed hopes. And at the end, when Robin takes the bull by the horns, says sayonara, and gets on that Black & Tan bus to NYC, the story is still about hope.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

A Beautiful Addition to Gay Literature

By Mark Ian Kendrick

Five stars is certainly not enough to describe my joy at this find. Mr. Soehnlein has created a masterpiece as far as I'm concerned. I've not found a fourteen year old character in any gay novel that I could related to so

well as I did with Robin in this story. As the storyline progressed Robin's character not only grew, but I did as well. I discovered what superior writing is all about as I read. I found myself going 'wow' often as I noted the skill at which Mr. Soehnlein had Robin negotiating through the world of normal boys-all while Robin is alternately stunned at his naiveté, and amazed at his own ability to get angry, feel lustful, lose himself, then gain his confidence. This novel made me remember a huge amount of adolescent angst, much like Robin does, since I grew up in a similar dysfunctional family. Robin's confusion with everyone around him was perfectly depicted-and I found myself remembering having thoughts very similar to his as I explored his inner world and listened to the conversations he had with those around him. Growing up in the environment he lives in is terribly enough, but coming of age and being gay in that kind of atmosphere is even more difficult. I really can't say enough about how incredibly rich this story is, and am finding myself amazed that this is a debut novel. Read this book. You will be touched like nobody's business when you do.

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