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## Opening doors, crossing thresholds

*The protagonist is irresistible, an adult in innocent's clothing*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

*The Boys and Their Baby*, By Larry Wolff. St. Martin's Press, 1988. 260 pages. \$8.95.

In the case of *The Boys and Their Baby*, you can judge the book by its cover. First, the pale-peach paper jacket sports the logo of St. Martin's Press Stonewall Inn Editions, the same series that published Randy Shilts' biography of Harvey Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. And the cover art — a simple, bronze-and-brown illustration of two men and

have been Huck's lover, an assortment of quirky and bright teenagers in Adam's private-school English class.

In San Francisco, Adam's structures fail him, and he is forced, gradually, to begin plotting his own life.

It is to Wolff's credit that he does not exploit Adam's naiveté — or the outstanding qualities of any of his distinctly-drawn characters. In fiction, the line between character and cartoon can be faint, and Wolff stays admirably on the side of realism. His characters are fully-dimensional, engaging folks, people you might like to invite over for brunch. And his protagonist is irresistible, an adult in innocent's clothing, trying hard to sift meaning from the tangle of mystery, sex, tragedy and wry humor that confronts him in his new home.

Wolff knows how to tell a tale. From the first moment Adam walks through the mirrored lobby of Huck's apartment building, we are with him and the gentle unfolding of his story. Wolff writes compact and detailed prose, clever and contemporary without slipping into the chatty brand-name-dropping of some current novelists. In one pivotal scene, Adam is mesmerized and moved by the sight of Huck and Christopher on the Golden Gate Bridge: "Christopher's silky hair is blowing, his silver-blue eyes excited; as if to balance himself he holds a shock of Huck's hair clutched in his fist, but now he doesn't pull. There are moments, and this is one of them, when the baby is so transcendently beautiful that Adam can't keep looking at him. He looks away, out to the ocean, then up at the graceful red frame of the bridge, back to San Francisco behind him...I will never forget this moment, Adam vows, and then the moment is already passing."

This is a deftly plotted novel, with just the right amounts of suspense, revelation and humor. And, like the books Adam's mother studies so carefully, there is a soft motor driving the plot, a subtext of gently probing questions: What happens to life when the structures are shifting, the taboos no longer potent? Can we truly plot our own lives, and what if our motives are less than pure? What does family mean, anyhow?

Adam may not have answers by the end of this book, but he — and we — surely have a sense that the range of response is wide indeed. Carrying Christopher up to the apartment, Adam remembers "the three of them on the bridge between ocean and bay, Huck naked comforting Christopher in the middle of the night...Huck and Adam looking down at Christopher in his crib last week. These are not moments that Adam can sort out right now."

The sweetly circular narrative ends as it began, with the crossing of a threshold — toward hope, toward love in all its complex and various forms, toward the possibility of growth for the baby, for the adult, for us all. ▼

## Books

an infant — matches the tone of this warm, expressive first novel.

The story seems simple enough at first. Adam Berg, a high school English teacher in his early 30s, relocates from Boston to San Francisco for a job and moves in with his old college roommate, Huck, whom he has not seen for a decade. The apartment's other occupant is Christopher, Huck's nearly one-year-old baby.

But in this cross-continental shift, as in the book, there is more going on than meets the eye. Adam's move to San Francisco is symbolic of a larger shift in his attitude and approach. He was raised in the tradition-bound world of academia, with a physics-professor father who died when Adam was two and an English-professor mother whom Adam adores.

His mother's academic specialty is structuralism; she is fascinated by the relationships between ideas, between people, between readers and texts. Adam has grown up with his mother's strict sense of form; his journey begins when the new life he encounters fails to fit.

Although Adam has already behaved as a bit of a renegade (he teaches high school, not college; he never bothered to get a graduate degree; he once quit teaching to repair telephone wires) he has managed to remain innocent of the world's complexity. He has leaned heavily on the various structures of school, family and relationships and allowed their rules to guide him.

"My life sort of leads me on, and I follow a few steps behind, confused," he writes in a letter to his mother.

That is, until San Francisco, where the traditions seem not to exist, where relationships turn complicated, triangular and layered. An engaging array of characters welcomes Adam to their world — Huck and baby Christopher, with their identical ice-blue eyes and spectacular smiles, a striking cabaret singer named Lucille, who may or may not



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