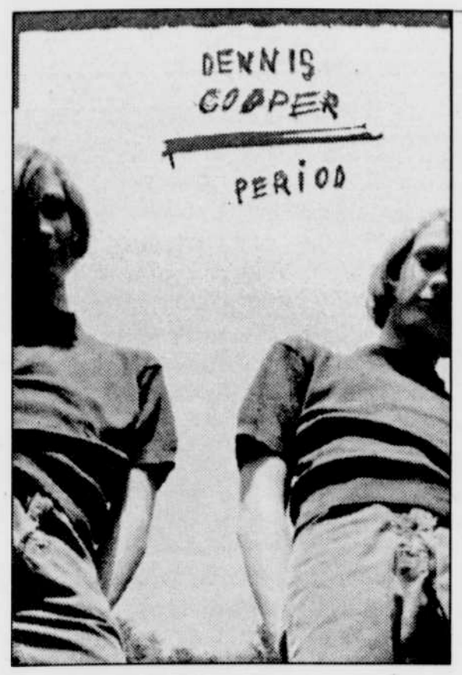

Boys will be boys

Smell teen spirits; skateboard on thin ice

PERIOD
by Dennis Cooper. Grove Press, 2000; $24 hardcover.

The last of a five-novel cycle by underground queer literary sensation Dennis Cooper—who once received a death threat from a radical gay activist group for his graphic, disturbingly violent depictions of gay male sex—*Period* is, like nearly all of his previous work, the finely wrought expression of an invigorating voice unparalleled in either the gay or literary communities.

The story involves two teen-age boys and their postmodern odyssey through small-town boredom, dime store Satanism, perverse sex, drugs, murder and unresolved longing. The pair, delirious from a combination of ennui and high pubescent levels of (homo)sexual frustration, become obsessed with a book called *Period*; its author, Walker Crane; and a Gothic rock band inspired by Crane's work, much of which deals with the untimely, violent demise of his boyfriend, George.

But George mysteriously seems to remain among the living and is, in his various unexplained incarnations, a symbol for that elusive, unattainable, "perfect" love object that can exist only in our fantasies. (Several young men conceivably could be "George," although it's impossible for the other characters or the reader to know whether he actually is alive or simply is living on in some collective unconscious or parallel universe.)

As we turn the pages, identities and narrative voices shift and morph constantly, bringing into focus the disorienting, hall-of-mirrors subjectivity of both fiction and "real" life.

"Keep watch over absent meaning," the epigraph admonishes, and sure enough, like sexually brazen literary iconoclasts George Bataille, Pauline Reage and Jean Genet before him, Cooper keeps his content disposable and pornographic—the better to carry off the difficult and involved formal permutations that clearly give his work its real reason to exist.

Period probably will not find a very receptive audience among those looking for the traditional good story or even traditional pornography, but it's sure to engage readers interested in fiction that functions as both diversion and criticism. —*Christopher McQuain*

WAR BOY
by Kief Hillsbery. William Morrow, 2000; $24 hardcover.

This novel slams. It rocks. It will grab you from the start and shake you by the balls until you're spent. *War Boy* starts with one of the most effective first paragraphs of recent times:

I'm Rad I'm deaf I don't talk I'm fourteen I'm telling the story.
And storytellers lie so why bother you ask.

Instantly and effortlessly, we are compelled to listen to this young man's wild, jagged, electric tale, and we are not allowed to leave until he tells us to.

War Boy is the story of Radboy, a young deaf skateboarder who is flying fast between youth and manhood. With his older "kweer" friend Johnnyboy, he flees a horror-story home life and finds himself in San Francisco, relying on the kindness of strangers, skaters, "kweers" and "tweekers" (drug users). There, he faces the fall of heroes; the lonely, joyful passion of being young (remember?); and the feelings of anger and desire that rise up within him. This is a stunning novel about identity—who we are and why we are who we are.

The most amazing aspect of *War Boy* is that it is Kief Hillsbery's first novel. A magazine writer and an outspoken environmentalist, the author takes over the fiction genre with jacked, no-holds-barred energy.

This novel bangs; it is buffed, frenzied and utterly colloquial. The story is passionate and relentless, and the people in it are addictive and beautiful. Employing the slang and style of the deaf and skateboard cultures, the tone of *War Boy* will make you feel like you're listening in on those distant, cute, buzz-cut skateboarders coming out of Cal's.

This language makes you shudder from its sheer intensity:

We lean toward each other at the same time same slo-mo speed and somehow I knew already.
How perfectly our lips.
How soft his are.
How melting the warmth how sweet the taste the touch the time together lasts forever.
Even when we leave him all I can think about is.
This.
Is.
It.

War Boy is one of the most provocative, sexy and utterly dramatic novels of recent memory. I swear, if you can read this novel and not come away believing Hillsbery is one of the freshest, most promising voices around, I'll eat your sk8bqard. —*Glenn Williams*

■ CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN *is a Portland freelance writer and a tireless observer of pop culture.*

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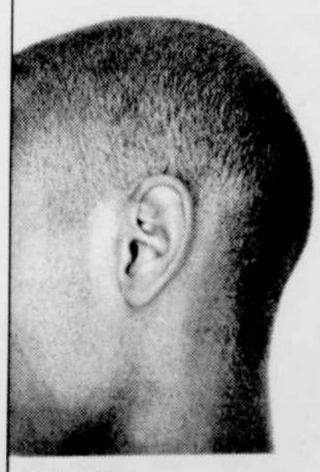
War Boy Kief Hillsbery

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