

ANY KIND OF LUCK
by William Jack Sibley. Kensington, 2001;
\$23 hardcover.

This is an ambitious, humorous and largely successful novel about two men, Clu and Chris, who leave the gay Mecca of New York's Christopher Street for rural—really rural—Grit, Texas.

Their move is prompted by the serious illness of Clu's mother, who is in the last stages of breast cancer.



Although this doesn't seem like the kind of plot that would evoke terms like "camp" and "humorous," William Jack Sibley pulls this off with surprising skill.

Peopled with a colorful menagerie of characters only Texas could produce, his novel

includes Clu's brother, Jaston, a caricature of the huge, aimless beer drinker who doesn't quite understand gay folks. Bettie Jean, the dying mother, raises Chihuahuas, and 12 of them are roaming the house.

A lot happens in *Any Kind of Luck*, and I mean a lot! Clu and Chris are befriended by Oleta Canfield, the Texas equivalent of Brooke Astor, who lives in a house colored "Woolworth's panties pink." She has decided to bring culture to town, funding *Agamemnon—The Musical* with the sole requirement that she play the lead. The only venue available is the Espinosa County Livestock Barn. You get the idea.

This book has that slick New York City gay humor with one bon mot after another. When Clu asks Chris what's on his mind, he simply responds, "I've been thinking." Clu: "Baby, you know how that just confuses you."

Yet *Any Kind of Luck* is only moderately well written. It suffers from an embarrassing soapbox preachiness that occasionally makes the reader squirm. Sibley gets his say about the evils of smoking, the narrow-mindedness of the Bible Belt and its negative effect on sex education in rural America. These lectures are all politically correct and valid, but they're also blatantly transparent.

Nevertheless, I recommend the novel for the smartness of its humor. Although a lot of it is camp, some of Sibley's one-liners are elevated with an unusual intelligence that had me laughing out loud.

Three treats

One for the guys and two for younger readers

Finally, there's some heart to this book that, even with the caveats mentioned above, kept me engaged to the very end.

—Richard Bray

THE SHARED HEART: PORTRAITS AND STORIES CELEBRATING LESBIAN, GAY AND BISEXUAL YOUNG PEOPLE

Edited by Adam Mastoon. HarperCollins, 2001;
\$6.95 softcover.

Picture the gay 11th-grader living in Homophobia, USA, surrounded by archconservative Baptist fundamentalists. He thinks that no one is like him, that he's the only sexual minority in the country. He feels like a freak, and people probably make sure he knows it. He might be suicidal, like so many of the gay youth in our country. He has no one to look up to. No youth center. He feels alone.

Or maybe you know this person—it's your lesbian niece who thinks something is wrong with her. Her parents embrace her sexuality, and her friends accept it. But she can't accept it—she doesn't know anyone who's lesbian and her age. She feels isolated. Where does she turn?

How might you break through to these people—especially when some of them live way across the country in towns you never would want to live in again?

With a book, perhaps. Next time you're visiting Homophobia, USA, why don't you donate a book to the local high school? Or why not wrap a book up and give it to your niece for her 16th birthday? You might save a life or two.

But then which book do you choose? So many titles are available, and you don't want something too dense or dull. You want something broad, something that shows a wide array of gay experiences.

I'd suggest *The Shared Heart*. The book

functions like a periscope, allowing young readers to see what awaits them outside the closet.

It features first-person profiles of subjects around the age of 20 from most ethnic backgrounds. Each segment starts with a photo followed by a one-page note in the individual's handwriting.

The people usually lend some advice or summarize their coming-out process. "If you are in the closet, know that it will be OK," Josie writes. "It took me almost three years of being out to myself before I truly came out to others."

The next two pages give a first-person account of how homosexuality has affected the person. For example, Liz starts her profile by saying: "I was called a dyke before I knew what the word meant or that I was one. I was 14 at summer camp when I looked at the wall above my best friend's bed and saw written there 'Liz is a dyke.'"

The Shared Heart contains 40 of these narratives but unfortunately lacks profiles from trans youth.

The prose will not win any awards, but it is smooth and has the ring of authenticity. A high school student reading this book in Homophobia, USA, might get a chance to feel more normal and less alone. If someone had given it to me when I was 16, I would've hid it under my pillow and read it multiple times.

—Peter Zuckerman

EMPRESS OF THE WORLD
by Sara Ryan. Viking, 2001;
\$15.99 hardcover.

I sure wish books like this were available back in the depths of the last century when I was a young teen-ager in love with other girls and feeling like the freak of all time. Now I'm no expert on how kids act and talk today, but this feels very real and very honest—probably because it contains lots of handwritten journal entries.

The journal keeper is Nic, a bright girl named after Nicola Tesla, of all people. She also likes to draw, although she says she "sucks." Atypically, she even gets along with her parents.



Nic spends the summer with a bunch of other gifted teens at a sort of archaeology camp. What she unearths are great friends and one great girlfriend, Battle Hall Davies. (It seems she was named after the building where her parents met, of all things.)

Battle dazzles Nic with her blond good looks and North Carolina charm. Battle seems so together, so poised, Nic decides she is the empress of the world.

Written by Portland author Sara Ryan, who looks young enough to have good recall of her own teen years, the story follows the ups and downs and heart-twisting reality of a first relationship.

Empress is receiving raves across the country, even in the mainstream media. It truly must be a sign of the times that a book like this can be met with such a big welcome.

Of course, it doesn't hurt that it is well written and charming. Although aimed at young adults, *Empress* also might appeal to older readers wanting to visit the childhood they wish they had.

—Oriana Green

SARA RYAN will read from *Empress of the World* 7 p.m. Nov. 13 during "Writers Talking" in the U.S. Bank Room at Multnomah County's Central Library, 801 S.W. 10th Ave.

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