

Brent Hartinger would like to accentuate the positive. "Adults always remember the angst of being a teen," says the 38-year-old from Tacoma, Wash. "But they don't remember the fun and humor."

So, in his new book Hartinger explores the world of gay high schoolers with a twist. "There's always a bashing, or someone commits suicide," he says of most gay teen books. "They're such downers."

Instead, Hartinger has written *Geography Club*, a comic page-turner about a group of very diverse kids who get together and find they have something in common: They're gay. This is a theme that is very close to Hartinger, as he is a founder and facilitator of Oasis, a 200-member gay teen support organization, as well as an adviser to a Gay Straight Alliance at a Tacoma high school.

Hartinger struggled for 15 years to be discovered as a writer. "I had the worst luck in the world. I learned that when the check clears, that's when you celebrate."

Today the author has plenty to celebrate, as sales of *Geography Club* have exceeded expectations, and he's been signed to write a sequel and two other young adult novels.

I caught up with Hartinger as he was finalizing plans to sign books June 15 at Portland Pride 2003.

Floyd Sklaver: Where did the idea for *Geography Club* come from?

Brent Hartinger: In many ways, it's based on my own teen-aged years...and my experience with a group called Oasis. For the first meetings I'd walk in and see this really diverse group of kids—suburban kids, farm kids, drag queens, butch lesbians, fem lesbians—and I'd

Accentuate the positive

Newly acclaimed Tacoma author sets up at Portland Pride

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

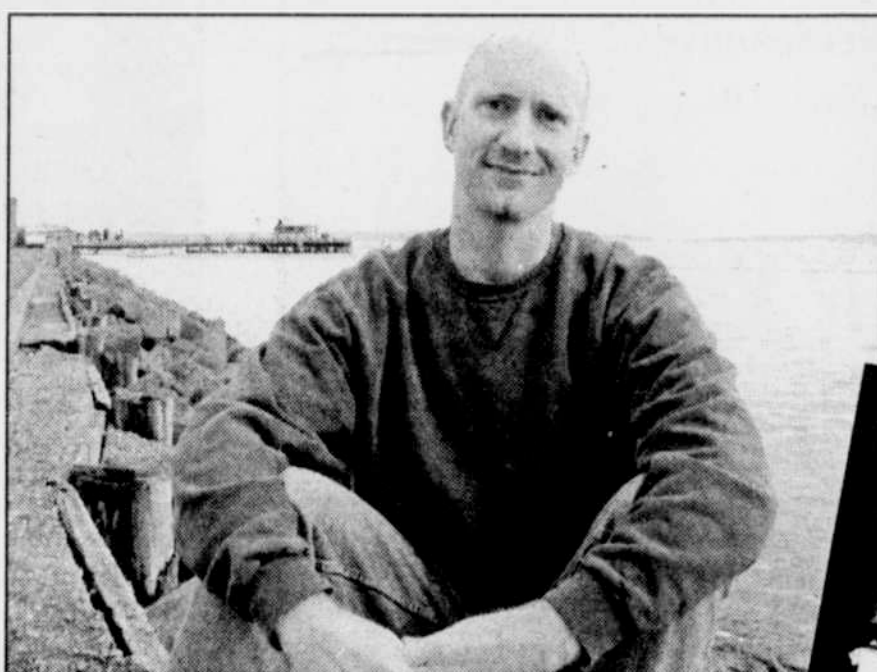
think, "This is going to be a disaster. What do these kids have in common?" Then they'd begin to speak, and it was magic.

FS: Tell me about your stack of earlier works.

BH: I used to write...every sort of journalism you can imagine—for *Advocate Men*, *Honcho*, *Mandate*, every magazine you can think of. I wrote porn stories for a while, but in order not to be classified as obscene, there had to be one nonporn article. Those paid more because everyone wants to write the porn.... I got a frantic call from an editor once. "Butt plugs," she said. "I need a story about butt plugs right now." So I wrote a story about butt plugs. My goal has always been to make a living as a writer.

FS: Why are there so few adult characters in *Geography Club*?

BH: I did that on purpose. I believe there's the world of teens and the world of adults, and the two have no idea what's going on in the



Young adult author Brett Hartinger thinks it's the best of times and the worst of times for gay teen-agers

other. I hate books about teens where...the adult comes in and saves the day. These are problems of teens, and they need to be solved by teens.

FS: Why doesn't the main character struggle more over his sexual identity—question it more?

BH: That isn't the issue facing teens today. Because of the Internet, *Will & Grace* and

Queer as Folk, [teens] spend time wondering whether they're gay, but it happens much younger. Teens today accept themselves just fine. The challenge is how to get the rest of the world to accept me.

FS: What was your high school life like?

BH: There was nastiness. I remember it being pretty dog-eat-dog, pretty brutal, physically and emotionally. There was a lot of name-calling and harassment.... I heard from a lot of adults who said I liked your book, but I didn't really want to go back to such an unpleasant time.

FS: Do you think it's harder to be a gay teen-ager today than 20 years ago?

BH: When I was growing up, I could take being gay, lock it away and not think about it at all. There was no Internet. I never saw a picture of a naked man until I was 19. There's so much porn on the Internet, and, when you look at porn, you know which works for you.... You're 16, 15, 14 when you are dealing with these issues, but you're still in high school where people are not necessarily liberal. That's what I mean when I say it's the best of times and worst of times for gay teen-agers. □

BRENT HARTINGER will sign *Geography Club* from noon to 5 p.m. June 15 at Waterfront Park.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance writer.

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