

BOOKS

Compassionate catty-ism

In the Bible Belt or in gritty urbania, gay authors always find plenty of oddballs

HOW I LEARNED TO SNAP
by Kirk Read;
Hill Street Press,
2003; \$13
softcover

Kirk Read's 2001 memoir *How I Learned to Snap*, just released in paperback, follows his experiences as a gay boy raised in Pat Robertson's hometown.

Presented as a series of riffs on themes (theater, fashion, pornography),

Snap tells of a young man struggling to find acceptance in the Bible Belt. Yet Read doesn't wallow in self-pity or despair. In fact, he is bold (premiering a story about coming out in high school while still in high school) and brash (demanding that he be allowed to take a boy to the prom).

Along the way, he is inspired by an assortment of oddballs and misfits, including Eve



Hill, a black high schooler who taught him to say, "Ooh, child" and armed him with an attitude. The author also relates spending hours writing in his journal and scribing flowery love notes to the objects of his adolescent desire.

Despite the difficulties of name calling, attacks and alcohol abuse, Read survives. From truck stops to football to cow tipping, this tale about coming of age in a nonurban environment is presented without embellishment.

In fact, that's the problem with the book. While the stories are true and sometimes funny, just as often they are not very interesting, petering out or falling flat before their point has been made. It's as if in being a memoirist Read forgot that he needed to be a storyteller as well.

Couple that with disconcerting jumps in the time frame—one moment he is in high school, the next in college and the next back in elementary school—and readers are left with the feeling that this is a portrait of an artist in search of an editor.

—Floyd Sklover

PULLING TAFFY
by Matt Bernstein Sycamore; *Suspect Thoughts*
Press, 2003; \$16.95 softcover

Anyone concerned that mainstream political acceptance threatens to dilute queers culturally should find welcome relief in Matt Bernstein Sycamore's fiction. Drawing from his experiences as a sex worker (he went by the handle "Mattilda"), he creates a world William S. Burroughs would find harrowing with characters John Waters would find charming.

Set against a grimy urban landscape, coked-



Kirk Read and Matt Bernstein Sycamore on one of their many tea room readings

up prostitutes in drag and rent boys embrace addiction, fight against abusive parents and a far more hostile world, turn tricks with pathetic clients and turn to each other for something that concepts of family and friendship do not adequately explain.

Sycamore renders their struggles with a terse, plain prose that makes possible his precision with dialect and detail. And what detail! Vomit, piss, blood, jissom, grease; coke, booze, pills; anorexia, bulimia, gluttony; Chanel, Fendi, Hermes; HIV. The surplus of the grotesque and the crass is meted out with a tense, angry energy yet in a voice that manages to be catty, contemptuous and compassionate all at once.

For all the filth and degradation, this voice humanizes its narrator and turns moments of pain, fury and sorrow into a bleak poetry:

"When JoAnne died, there was cardboard in my ears, even though I don't know what that means. When you leave cardboard out in the rain, it rots, collapses but doesn't disintegrate. Maybe I'm writing about my ears because that's how I found out, Laurie called to say JoAnne's dead, and I wanted cardboard in my ears, only it rots, collapses but doesn't quite disintegrate."

Memory and the need to survive compete for the narrator's attention, breaking consciousness into moments of the immediate and of remembered trauma. The salve is humor, of course, not derived from scatology (though there is plenty of that) but from the trauma itself—finding within the pain elements of the absurd that the narrator can extract and release.

For all the gauzy pink, flaming red and golden yellow that color Sycamore's world, he is definitely singing the blues.

—Kevin Moore

KIRK READ and MATT BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE join forces to read (apparently quite theatrically) from their respective works 7:30 p.m. Aug. 13 at *Twenty-Third Avenue Books*, 1015 N.W. 23rd Ave., and 7 p.m. Aug. 18 at *Corvallis' Grass Roots Bookstore*, 227 S.W. Second St.

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