

BOOKS

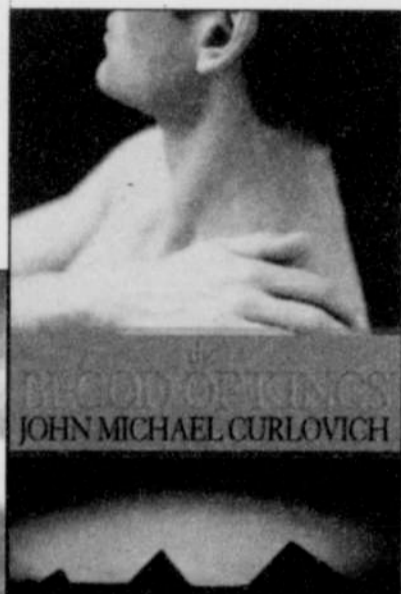
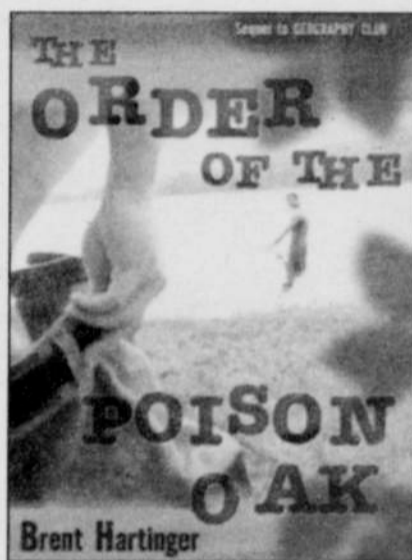
The Order of the Poison Oak

by Brent Hartinger; HarperTempest, 2005; \$15.99 hardcover

Books geared for gay teens have been around since 1969's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*, but the genre of young adult gay fiction is just now coming into its own. Perhaps the best practitioner of the genre is Brent Hartinger of Tacoma, Wash., whose first book, *Geography Club*, was a huge hit when it was released in 2003.

The sequel, *The Order of the Poison Oak*, once again features the author's alter ego, Russel, along with original Geography Club members Min and Gunnar.

The school year has ended and, after coming out publicly in *Geography Club*, Russel is tired of being the token "freak." Gunnar has scored a job as a counselor at a summer camp, and Russel and Min decide to join him. They arrive to discover that the first two-week session will be populated exclusively by 10-year-old burn survivors,



The bloom of youth

Fiction about young queers

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

each horribly scarred (both physically and emotionally). Russel fights to maintain control of his campers, then fights with his friends when he and Min fall for the same beautiful counselor and Gunnar refuses to be set up with a girl Russ finds for him. In the

most memorable scene, the campers are taunted by unscarred teens while Russel, to his shame, says nothing. It's a moving moment, made poignant by Hartinger's honest depiction of Russel's conflicted emotions.

Unlike *Geography Club*, *The Order of the Poison Oak* is a little heavy-handed in its use of metaphors and meaningful messages for an adult audience. For instance, Russel tells his bunk a campfire story about how scars create a magic skin that protects them from

harmful words. But it also contains the wonderful voice of the exasperated Russel, whose journey into maturity is worthy of many sequels still to come.

Hartinger is clearly a writer to watch out for, and this reviewer eagerly awaits the next adventures of Russel and his friends.

The Blood of Kings

by John Michael Curlovich; Alyson Publications, 2004; \$14.95 softcover

I'm too much of a sissy to be a horror fan. I have nightmares reading Stephen King novels, I'm squeamish at the sight of blood, and I once even fainted during a CPR instruction film.

So, with a bit of trepidation, I began reading *The Blood of Kings* by "seasoned horror novelist" John Michael Curlovich.

I needn't have worried, though, for the plot, while silly and slim, is certainly not scary.

Jamie, a hunky teen-ager from a small farming community in western Pennsylvania, goes to college in the big city on a sports and music scholarship. (He is both a talented swimmer and classical pianist.) Unfortunately, the campus has been plagued by a series of ritual killings. In the past year, seven guys (all handsome and athletic) have

been mutilated, their organs, eyes and genitals removed from their bodies. Three more murders occur within the first 40 pages (including one discovered by Jamie on the night of his first piano recital—horrors!).

Curiously, the administration downplays the incidents, and no one seems to be afraid. If a serial killer was loose on a college campus (as there was in 1990 in Gainesville, Fla.), you can bet that wouldn't be the reaction.

Jamie becomes obsessed with Danilo, a professor of Egyptology, and they begin a clandestine affair. (Jamie worries more about his scholarships than the murder of seven boys who all look like him.) As he falls completely under Danilo's spell, more and more athletes turn up dead. Meanwhile, Danilo's appearance changes whenever Jamie sees him; sometimes he looks older, other times younger. (Cue the organ music!)

By the time Danilo reveals that he has lived more than 3,000 years, is the brother of the pharaoh Tutankhamen and survives by drinking the blood of closeted young men, Jamie is too much in love to turn back. Unfortunately, once the mystery of *The Blood of Kings* is solved, more than a hundred pages remain, and Curlovich offers nothing to keep the reader engaged until the novel's end. **J**

BRENT HARTINGER will read from his second novel, *The Last Chance Texaco*, from 4:15 to 4:45 p.m. April 24 during the first-ever Wordstock Book Fair on the Target Children's Stage in Exhibit Hall D at the Oregon Convention Center, 777 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

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