

books

Dysfunction

Queer novels explore shattered families

by Karen Kudej

All American Boy

by William J. Mann; Kensington Books, 2006; \$16 softcover

When Wally Day fled the small all-American town of Brown's Mill for an acting career in the city, he never wanted to look back. His past was tainted with memories of a mother he adored who didn't defend him from his abusive father. His father, long dead, punished Wally for not being "boy" enough. And then there is Zandy—Alexander Reefy—the first man to show Wally love. Wally betrayed Zandy, confessing to their relationship, which began when Wally was 13, and signing the charges that sent Zandy to prison and made him an outcast in the town.

Wally's past comes flooding back when his mother, Regina, calls to ask for his help. Wally heads home to find that not much has changed in Brown's Mill—though his cousin, Kyle, the true troublemaker in the family, is missing, and Regina is behaving strangely. With the help of Miss Althea, the town's queen and Wally's childhood mentor, Wally struggles to forgive his mother and

to seek forgiveness from a dying Zandy. He also meets Dee, the boy not much older than he was when he met Zandy. Dee offers him a chance to understand Zandy from a different perspective and shows him a door through which he can move on in his life.

Meanwhile, Regina has her own reconciliation to do with the past. At last she is standing up for herself and reclaiming her life after the marriage she never wanted to Wally's father and the death of the sister she relied on for guidance. As the novel progresses, one skeleton after another marches out of the closet to confront Wally and Regina as they try to make sense of each other.

All American Boy is William J. Mann's fourth novel. The writing is heavy and clunky at times, but ultimately Mann tells a complex, sensitive story of hope and redemption.

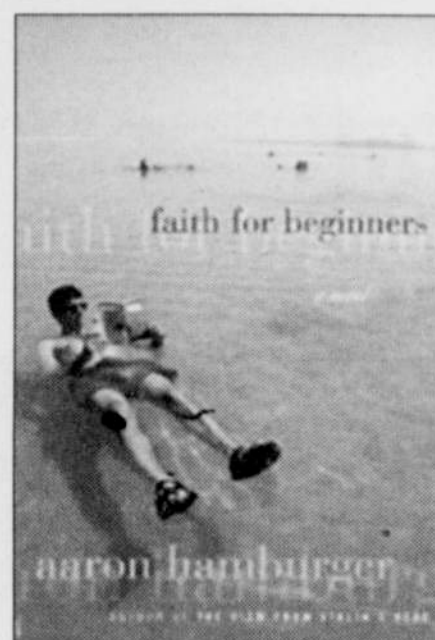
Faith for Beginners

by Aaron Hamburger; Random House, 2005; \$23.95 hardcover

Why can't we all just get along? That is the question at the heart of *Faith for Beginners*, a first novel by Aaron Hamburger that follows the Michaelson family on the Millennium Marathon 2000 group tour of Israel.

Helen Michaelson booked the trip for herself, her chronically ill husband and her youngest son, Jeremy, in an attempt to get their family back on track. After years of voluntarily attending an Orthodox school, Jeremy has gone punk with dyed hair and multiple piercings. He has also followed in his older brother's footsteps with a taste for men. Unlike his brother, who is in a successful relationship, Jeremy, going on his fifth year in college, is struggling to find someone to love. He is recovering from a near miss with an overdose of pills, ice cream and alcohol that even he isn't sure was intentional or accidental.

Except for the oppressive heat, the trip is uneventful until the group reaches Jerusalem. As Helen hopefully muses, "If Jeremy was going to find



himself, where could be more fitting than the capital of the Jews' home turf?"

During a tour of the Western Wall, Jeremy is at last able to ditch his parents and joins a group of youths going home with locals for a free Shabbat

dinner. He meets Noam, his host's son, who confesses to homosexual thoughts and takes Jeremy to a park where local men cruise. There Jeremy meets Ahmed, aka George, a young, deaf Palestinian with a fetish for feet in football socks. George shows Jeremy a side of Jerusalem typically hidden from tourists and sucks him into the complexity of the political situation.

Jeremy's passive father decides to leave early, freeing Helen for a journey of her own through the Holy City. With her husband gone, Helen succumbs to the adulterous intentions of the hairy and handsome Rabbi Sherman. Alone, she must confront her feelings about her marriage while examining the lure of the rabbi and struggling to understand her son.

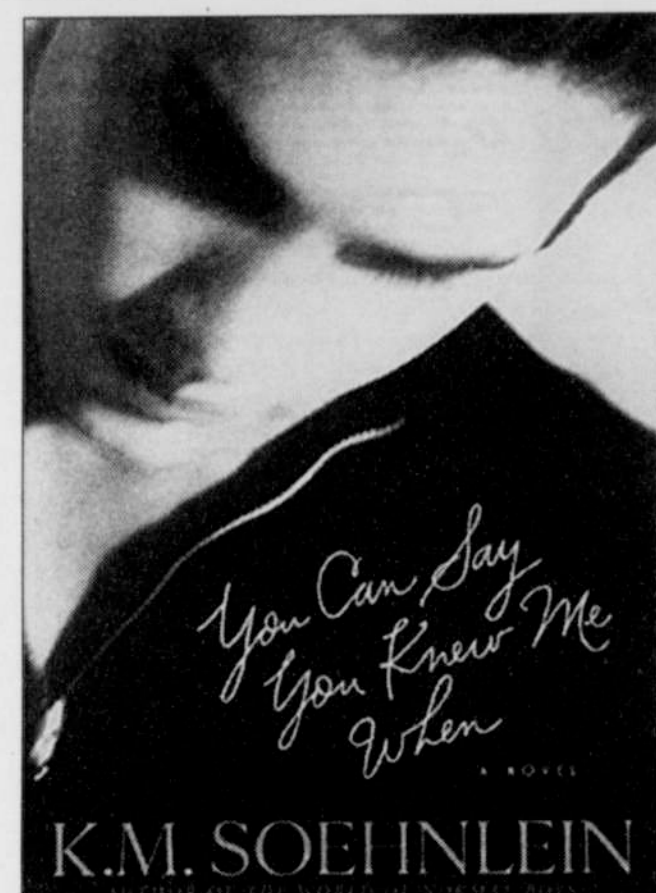
Faith for Beginners is a well-crafted work. With poignancy, humor and quirkiness, Hamburger offers a touching story of a mother and a son who, in attempting to locate themselves, come to an understanding of one another.

You Can Say You Knew Me When

by K.M. Soehnlein; Kensington Books, 2005; \$23 hardcover

Jamie Garner has been coasting along, living the easy life in San Francisco with his friends and his dot-com boyfriend, Woody, until his estranged father dies after a drawn-out battle against an Alzheimer's-related dementia. After a five-year absence, Jamie returns to his New Jersey hometown, the prodigal son, home too late to make amends.

While cleaning the attic of his father's house, Jamie discovers a box of letters and writings from a year his father spent in San Francisco. The letters allude to an uncle Jamie never knew about and to a friend of his father's who seems suspiciously queer.



This fascinates Jamie, as his father vowed never to accept his lifestyle.

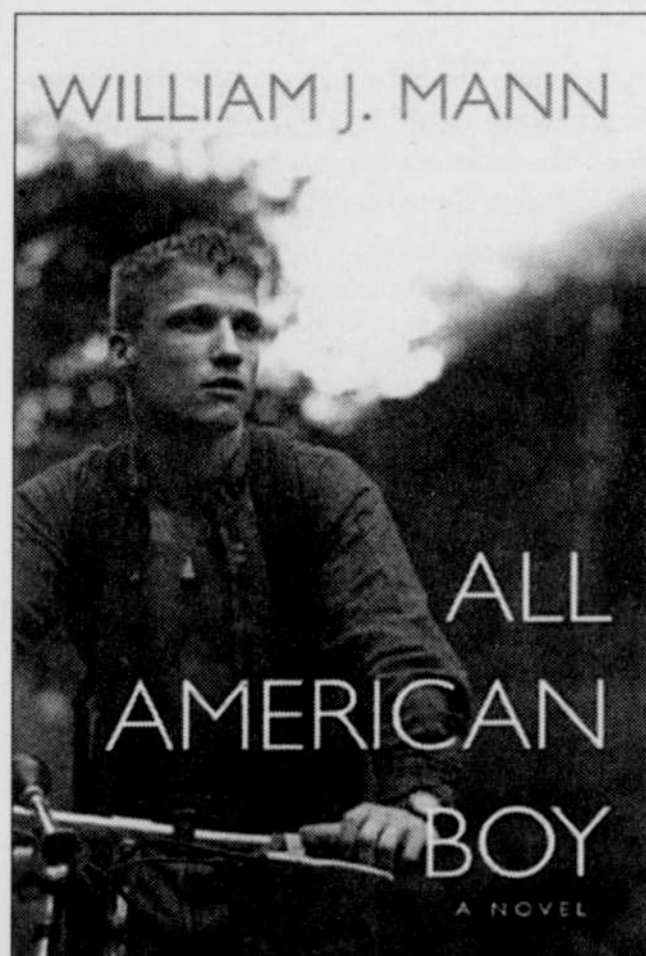
Jamie returns restless to San Francisco. He tracks down a painter his father knew in the Bay Area and begins to piece together his father's time in "Frisco," hoping to find a story that will get him back into the radio production scene. Frustrating dead ends lead him into the depths of slackerdom. He cheats on Woody, doesn't return calls to his friends and lets his bills pile up.

Just when he's about to hit bottom, his sister mails him another clue from his father's house: a journal documenting a trip to a cabin in rural California. Jamie rents the cheapest car he can find and sets out to retrace his father's steps, trying to understand how the young man who went west inspired by Jack Kerouac and the Beat movement turned into the conservative, intolerant father Jamie knew.

Along the way, Jamie meets Jed, a young man in search of direction. Jed leads Jamie to the area his father had written about in his journal. Jamie returns to San Francisco and continues his search. Ultimately, he finds the lead he needs and is able to track down his lost uncle, who had also been rejected by Jamie's father.

The strength of the novel lies in the details of San Francisco's 1960s beatnik scene contrasted with the city during the dot-com business boom. While K.M. Soehnlein's prose is light and easy to read, the plot is predictable. The reader will either sigh with relief or yawn with boredom when Jamie finally takes responsibility for his actions. **jo**

KAREN KUDEJ is a Portland free-lance writer.



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