A Signal Man

May 1, 2000 By Hanya Yanagihara

Signals
Joel Rothschild
New World Library
168 pp., $17.95

First-time author Joel Rothschild's annus horribilis was not 1986, when he was diagnosed with AIDS, but 1994, when his best friend, Albert Fleites, also a PWA, committed suicide. Since Albert had shown no signs of rage or self-pity, the action stunned and baffled Rothschild. "He was the sweetest, kindest, most gentle person I ever met on the planet," Rothschild says. "If someone needed money, he would give it to them at the expense of his own eating."

But before his suicide, Albert extracted a promise from Rothschild: The first to die would try to contact the other from the afterworld. Rothschild was skeptical, to say the least. "I was a card-carrying member of the National Atheists Association," he recalls. "But the night he died, there was a translucent light above my bed." Later, Rothschild was rummaging through a thrift store and came upon a 19th-century book of quotations. Only Albert's favorite was underlined, a Chinese proverb: "Meeting is the beginning of parting." "That would be very easy to interpret as a coincidence," Rothschild says. "But it didn't feel like one to me."

Convinced that Albert was keeping his promise, Rothschild wrote Signals, which is as much about the necessity of contact with the living as it is about the possibility of contact with the dead. A simply and sincerely narrated addition to the expanding gay-spirituality shelf, Signals is at once a deeply felt documentation of Rothschild's own psychic metamorphosis and a tribute to a generation of friends lost to AIDS—including Kelly Cole (son of Nat King Cole), Tony Hamilton from Mission Impossible and Rothschild's ex, Mark Simon.

Rothschild's story of beating the AIDS odds is inspirational enough, but he has a higher purpose: to share the "messages" from Albert and other spirits, which has compelled him to befriend complete strangers in the least likely of places. Not surprisingly, the book has won lavish praise from the likes of Iyanla Vanzant, Deepak Chopra and Marianne Williamson and made Rothschild a hot item on the talk-show circuit. Although he admits that his story risks being panned along with the pop-parapsychology of the Psychic Friends' Network, Rothschild believes his communications with Albert came with a responsibility: to teach compassion. He also believes the book has the power to move even the hardest cynics. "I can't control what people think," he says. "However it may open up doors for some skeptics, because I was a skeptic too."

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/A-Signal-Man-10412-8336