Deaf Jam

May 1, 2000 By Esther Kaplan

War Boy
Kief Hillsbery
Rob Weisbach Books/William Morrow and Company
352 pp., $24.00

“I’m rad I’m deaf I don’t talk I’m 14 I’m telling the story.” And with that, War Boy drops you through a rabbit hole into a crystal-fueled kid culture of skaters, punks, skins and queers, from the working-class ’hoods of Monterrey to San Francisco’s back-alley clubs. It’s a world defined as much by music as speed, so there’s something strangely brilliant about Kief Hillsbery’s decision to tell this story in the words of Radboy, who, always hanging with the hearing, communicates though prose poems, puns and comics scribbled on the pad he carries as faithfully as his skateboard. Radboy finds out that his “kweer skin” buddy Finn is HIV positive when he nicks Finn’s head while shaving it. He comes face-to-face with AIDS again only when he starts poking around Finn’s bathroom in this excerpt:

Jonnyboy would have checked out the medicine cabinet behind the mirror the first time he came in here to take a leak. Just to acquaint himself with the house pharmaceuticals. But I’ve been here ages now and I still haven’t. I bet it would have taken his breath away too since I’m no druggie but it sucks out most of mine when I pull open the mirror to see what’s inside. No Band-Aids or mouthwash or Q-Tips or even childproof Tylenol just row upon row stack upon stack of brown prescription bottles and not the little quarter-size diameter ones either. They’re all industrial-strength jumbos and every one has Finn’s name on the label. I’ve never seen these drugs before anywherez and Jonnyboy taught me all the ones that shred and get you high.

This is exactly how the plague fits into Hillsbery’s countercultural coming-of-age tale. War Boy just may be a new kind of AIDS novel, where the epidemic isn’t the story’s center, but is there, persistently, nonetheless: a bit of teen dispirit that no circle of kids is without.

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