Normal, New Jersey

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The World of Normal Boys

By K.M. Soehnlein
Kensington Books, New York City
282 pages, $22

This moving first novel, which thoroughly conjures the life of a queer 13-year-old circa 1978, is actually the back story of a 1980s AIDS activist. Author K.M. Soehnlein, a member of ACT UP, had tried writing a novel back then about someone like himself, a gay man in his twenties in New York City. “I found I had no distance,” he told *POZ*, “so as a writing exercise I created this guy’s whole story in order to figure out how he got where he is today.”

Out of that emerged *The World of Normal Boys.* Soehnlein’s suburban New Jersey normalcy conceals both pleasures and dangers: central character Robin’s growing attraction to boys and his little brother Jackson’s near-fatal accident. Robin must contend not only with his own slippery identity, but with the shifting ground of a family in crisis and his amorphous guilt over Jackson’s injury (for which Robin is partially responsible). Robin finds solace in rebellion: He smokes pot, cuts school, runs away to New York City for a day and explores sex with two other adolescent boys.

Soehnlein says that Robin’s story reflects those of dozens of ACT UPers he knew -- suburban exiles who thought that “being gay was about being outside the culture, an outlaw.” Robin develops a similar worldview; by the end of the novel, “he very much identifies as someone ’not normal.’”

With a tragic accident at its center, *Normal Boys* reflects how those living in the shadow of AIDS must find a way for sexuality to coexist with grief, guilt and fear. Of Robin’s first blowjob, given by a 16-year-old neighbor, the author writes, “He can distinguish Todd’s teeth from his tongue from the insides of his cheeks. It gets better from here: an embrace, a tightening, a satisfying tension climbing upward, taking over.” It’s as if Robin is distinguishing all of his tangled emotions in this single event -- the risky teeth of danger and loss from the soft tongue and cheeks of love.

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