



# Mysterious Skin

*Scott Heim*

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## **Mysterious Skin** Scott Heim

At the age of eight Brian Lackey is found bleeding under the crawl space of his house, having endured something so traumatic that he cannot remember an entire five-hour period of time.

During the following years he slowly recalls details from that night, but these fragments are not enough to explain what happened to him, and he begins to believe that he may have been the victim of an alien encounter. Neil McCormick is fully aware of the events from that summer of 1981. Wise beyond his years, curious about his developing sexuality, Neil found what he perceived to be love and guidance from his baseball coach. Now, ten years later, he is a teenage hustler, a terrorist of sorts, unaware of the dangerous path his life is taking. His recklessness is governed by idealized memories of his coach, memories that unexpectedly change when Brian comes to Neil for help and, ultimately, the truth.

## **Mysterious Skin Details**

Date : Published May 10th 2005 by Harper Perennial (first published 1995)

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Author : Scott Heim

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# From Reader Review Mysterious Skin for online ebook

## Tres Trece says

No sé cómo llegué a ella, pero hace años, miré la adaptación de Mysterious skin por primera vez. Desde entonces esta historia dejó una impresión en mí tan fuerte, que era difícil de descifrar. Luego descubrí que era un libro, pero Heim no es fácil de conseguir en México (hay solo tres reseñas de este libro en booktube, todas en inglés). Así que la búsqueda de esta lectura se quedó at the back of my mind. Finalmente encontré el libro hace unos meses en ebook y ahora lo termino. Qué, pinche, librazo.

Amo la manera en que Heim habla de cosas super fucked up de una manera tranquila, simple but mesmerizing. Su forma de explicar dos distintas maneras de lidiar con el trauma me llegó demasiado.

Próximamente reseña en el canal. En español para variar.

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## Toby says

I reckon I've had this book for the best part of ten years, just sitting there unread waiting for the day when I felt like reading the original novel of a powerful and truly memorable film, perhaps even the finest work by one of my favourite directors. I nearly gave it away several times, sure that it was just taking up unnecessary space in my overburdened shelves, I mean, what more could it offer me that the movie hadn't already given in spades?

And now? I'm relieved that it is over, there's a chapter describing the grooming of a young boy by a middle aged man told from the perspective of the young boy who apparently knew he was gay and desperately wanted what was happening. That was one of the more creepy and disturbing reading moments of my life that's for certain, but it's done so well, the alternating first person narratives providing not just different perspectives as a release but also serving to make the personal revelations that the two major characters experience all the more powerful.

There's a whole bunch of the mundane and everyday about the lives of the narrators that ordinarily I would love but as I already knew the major plot beats from the film (which it turns out was a pared down and to the point adaptation that still manages to keep the same atmosphere and emotional arc of the source material) I found myself often getting impatient over rather than simply enjoying the journey Heim was taking me on. But come the end I was still sufficiently gripped and moved by the emotional content that I felt compelled to order Heim's two other novels to continue experiencing such skilled writing that resonates with me so fully.

Quite remarkable, and I'm fully delighted that I eventually took the plunge to engage with this story as it was conceived by a talented young writer.

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## Mariel says

*"Why now?" Neil asked. "Why do you need this now? Why did you search me out?"*  
*"I'm tired of it," I said. "I want to dream about something else for a change."*

I loved the 2004 film of *Mysterious Skin* (directed by Gregg Araki) more than I do the original novel. Scott Heim's *We Disappear* is one of my special favorites that I have read this year (I am a lucky dog and I know it because I have read a lot of favorite novels in 2012). That film and that novel did something that was, to me, astonishingly correct in a way that I haven't seen anywhere else. How do you go on in love when the love you felt you had, the purest and truest love you've ever known, could not be true, real or pure? It could never really be yours. What if you always wanted it back and all other love was its blurry lined edges of an echo? It's doubt. It's hollow heart. It's a gut feeling that's empty. Simply being able to be simply touched has been grave robbed.

I remember reading all sorts of complaints about the film (and especially the charismatic actor who portrayed Coach Heider. If you care about this sort of thing at all, Bill Sage is good in Hal Hartley's *Simple Men*), like it was too disturbing that nine year old Neil was already a homosexual (nine is not too young to have sexual feelings), and that the Coach was too attractive to Neil and to his single mother. One, who the fuck do they think molests kids, anyway? People people trust. More importantly, it wouldn't hurt for Neil to be abandoned by the coach when he got too old if you don't see how sad it was that this strings to hold me down attached affection had meant the world to him. I remember bullshit imdb posts about showing how they hide for the parents, as if that was the point. The mom wasn't looking. I care about Neil. It was his spirit that was trapped in the Coach's petrie dish. The coach had all of those video games and multi pack cereal sets for a reason. That's why it is so cruel. He loved him like that. Neil was left to hold those broken pieces.

All of that is in this book. I want to talk about something else. The feeling that I had from *Mysterious Skin* more than anything else was that dream of being that awkward kid everybody hates who has no place and then finding that kindred spirit, bosom companion, soul mate, bff 4-ever or whatever. I can see him as this lonely kid who watches a group going into a marathon of his favorite horror film series and wishes he could change enough vital cells in his body to become different enough to be that kind of person who could just say, "Hey, that second one was really good when they chop that guy's head off." They'd agree and soon it would be blood and guts and we have a bootleg of the new one and do you want to come over and watch it? I felt like that's what Scott Heim wanted more than anything else. You'd then fall asleep together watching the movies and then while your legs are tangled up on the floor you could wake up and all those unconscious things would seep into your clothes and you would sense if you could be safe about those other things too. *We Disappear* had it and *In Awe* had it too. *In Awe* had the wish for it and *We Disappear* had it because Scott Heim wanted it so much. It was in him all the time. Okay, I know I said the same thing about *Mysterious Skin* the film back in the day. I kept watching it until I (so sadly) had to return my rental because of that feeling. I had the feeling in my clothes that I could talk to this movie. We fell asleep together. Brian meets this other goth kid, Eric, and I remember thinking this kid was some kind of angel or something (not to sound completely stupid right now). I had hope because of Eric being the kind of guy that would sleep dream this stuff in the middle of every other life sleep. Eric is Brian's connection to Neil. His I talk in my sleep and like a vampire Neil doesn't show up in my mirrors connection. Eric watches Neil return to the scene of the crime. He came in through the bathroom window and I hope to god he won't leave in a body bag scene. He knows that he only wants older men. What would the coach look like if they aged him for the wanted posters? He loved both Neil and Brian for who they were and it wasn't some over the top thing. Neil who is elusive and Brian who is be reached or die. I believed it. Do I want to believe it too much to do the work for them myself? Yes.

*In Awe* and *Mysterious Skin* maybe are too self conscious about getting that feeling, like if two kids became best friends because they were both gay and then they turned their faces to the wall where it is graffitied fuck **queers** you. There's one scene when Brian finally confronts his dad about the two nights he was found dirty and bleeding in the crawl space behind the house. (I could go off on why "Did you know?" is really the wrong question and why so many stories don't get it that should be "Why didn't you stop it?" That's what you

say. I guess the confrontation doesn't want the answer. You can't change the past. It could be the wrong kind of satisfaction like returning to the scene of the crime and after the revenge you are left with empty belly of undigested eats itself when its starving. "Why didn't you stop it?" is Batman after he has had his revenge. Getting asked if anyone molested you isn't the salve stories think it is. It's actually really traumatizing.) Brian says "daddy dear" and Eric is like a "No shit!" salute in mouth impressed. Brian has finally stuck up for himself. It's such a great scene and still a bit too pull back for the stage, too us against them. Heim knew what he was doing. But... Neil is the wounded wife who alights the funeral pyre, tragically for some undeserving husband, his smoke touching the daylight stars for all of those people who would patrol the movie theatres in hopes of someone asking them if they liked number four when that guy got it in the gut. I hate being picky about this. It's such a longed for feeling that it is hard not to be suspicious if it feels like it is being tried too hard for. Yet, I loved Eric for trying so hard with Neil. Brian needed it so much. Oh, I still think Eric is an angel for being Brian's friend.

Neil is an outside beacon to the others. Maybe because he pines so much for love. I have this feeling that it's when I get there one day (with a foot in the shadow past, don't doubt) dream I've been scared of. Heim's book doesn't do it ultimately, thank my lucky sirius, but it touches on that dreaded get to the real world happy ending because Neil being attractive isn't the point. I wanted Wendy to be a friend rather than to know he pulls them in, you know? Caring isn't hard. I'd believe it! At times this feels too needy, the Wendy, the alluring Neil.

Hell, I remember thinking that the movie almost tried too hard and that I wouldn't change a thing. Sometimes in my memory I build up these things that mean a lot to me (I'm scared of how much I do this). It's unlikely anyone here has seen Tully but let's use it as an example anyway. It's another one of those faces that's not perfect but the more you look at it the more beautiful it becomes and soon you couldn't see any other symmetry possible to make it more beautiful. I wouldn't change a thing. So Glenn Fitzgerald's character Earl is this sensitive young man with an overbearing man whose pretty boy brother named Tully (junior). Tully intrudes on Earl's special place in the cinema. At the end of the film when they have had their meaningful story arcs (this sounds pat but this movie is something special, really) and Tully accepts his brother for who he really is we see Earl again at the movies. He turns around to look behind him like he hopes his brother will come in and bother him in the movies again. He's not there. Earl then looks overjoyed to be eating popcorn and watching the movies after the seconds fast acceptance that he's alone. I imagined this almost hopeful look that he's there to see his brother. It's not there. I can't stop picturing that look when I think of this movie, all the same. I remember Mysterious Skin scenes in the movie that are and aren't there. I don't want to know if they aren't there. I have an image of Brian's socks. So simple and, sadly, permanently mama's little boy. The cereal boxes flying over their heads before young Neil and the coach make love is there like the wrong wish fulfillment when you get what you wanted and you could never have meant it, never in hell frozen over. That's in the book. Joseph Gordon-Levitt has the daring to be disappointed in his skin, like what if another love intruded on his old one? He has the chase for the past in the future on the prowl for men. All of the complications with his mother. Maybe I'm moving back towards movies because these days I can't stop thinking about how an actor would play something I read in books. Or I'm moving towards books that I can "play" in my head because I get to see what the movie will not show. I want to know what I would see in the way they stand. The pauses and how the air feels between them and everything else. Someone stages it and then it lives past them like how a kid could never be the whole birth of their parents. (Maybe like a song you can really sing along to.) Neil taking care of the mother and it would kill him if he never stops taking care of her. Everything he can't bear to leave and it's all stale time that should have not be reached by any time machine. If there's such a thing as time, please run far away from this. Looks on Brian's (Brady Cobert) face and how he inches to admitting what happened to him so that he can dream about anything else at all. His dreams are exhausted. He's sick and tired of being afraid like breathing. It would cost this kid to raise his voice. The book has it all. Maybe the difference was in me trying too hard

for all of these different perspectives (I forgot all about Neil's gal pal Wendy. I didn't miss her) while reading the book and with actors there was flesh and blood for me to believe when it is in their souls to let themselves go to sleep enough to wake up with all that tired getting shared enough to not be too much to bear anymore. There's a restfulness, I guess is what I really want to say, in responses to each other. (I'm doing a think-write thing here.) Mysterious Skin the novel has the restlessness. Everybody is on the prowl in the mind if they could only go backwards. I get exhausted too.

I want to believe that they found that friend after all of that shit. It's not a way of making it okay but it's a way of moving on. Somewhere home to go to, you know? I love Scott Heim for understanding that that is all you can do. I didn't love it as much as We Disappear. THAT book inspired me to write a (still unsent) letter to Scott Heim thanking him for being him. I wish I could ask him if he felt that way writing that book. The way you have all these unanswered questions and you can only project figments to carry around and talk to. I wonder if I saw him, say at a Joy Williams book signing (we have an unreserved love for this lady in common. And I KNEW it reading We Disappear before I went on his site and found out it was oh so true), would I think "There's that person that sees shit and it's that future love that's okay."?

Oh, and there's so much about this book that I'm not going to talk about unless you want to fall asleep with me here and mind accept stuff. I don't want to write friends for myself to do that. Scott Heim understood. I never had much hope anyone would. That meant so much to me. I hope I won't build up how much and will see symmetry and not the beautiful face. I want to total love this. It could come. Does everything have to dream so hard? I think I wouldn't change a thing, though. His awkwardness pulls me.

Oh, and I loved that the big scene of the 1973 UFO that Brian is so obsessed with was in the town where I was born. I knew it!

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## **Chippy Marco says**

This book was so emotionally draining, the topic upsetting, the characters superbly portrayed, the story slow, but absolutely riveting, making it hard to look away from the pages. I've also seen the movie. Both medias are exceptionally done. I don't know how to write a review that can do this book the justice it deserves. Also, the writer is a master with words, his writing is stunning. I still can't comprehend how his writing can be so fantastic when the topic was so horrifying. The writer should be commended for his skill.

This story is about trauma and abuse, the tale of two boys who were taken advantage of by a pedophile, their baseball coach. One of the boys has grown into a promiscuous teenager who prostitutes himself, the other is an emotionally and socially inhibited young man, who is obsessed with aliens, his memories of what happened to him distorted. He goes on a journey to discover why parts of his memory are blacked out, his journey leading him to the other teenager, who remembers everything, but doesn't understand the full emotional damage of what happened.

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## **Frederick says**

I first noticed this book in my local library shortly after it was published. At the time it had the photograph of Froot Loops cereal on the cover. I think I noticed the Froot Loops on the spine. It was on the new shelf. I

went to it, lured by the loops which anybody my age, give or take (mostly take) a few years, would instantly recognize from ads seen on Saturday morning network TV. The title intrigued me. I think it's from a song, but don't quote me on that. The song itself may be quoted in the book. I can't remember. I don't tend to re-read books. This novel has been stuck in my head ever since I read it, which I started doing the moment I pulled it from the shelf.

What Scott Heim managed to do with this novel was capture the dark side of the mood conveyed in those Saturday morning commercials. The world of more or less fluorescent plastics marketed toward children.

Yes, this is a shocking book about predator, victim and loss. But a lot of books are about that.

MYSTERIOUS SKIN works on an almost subconscious level. Somehow, watching THE ARCHIES as a boy of about twelve, there was a discomfort. I knew the networks were working with advertizers and throwing harsh colors at me, hurtling sound effects at my ears, as cheaply and pervasively as possible, in order to get me to shell out some allowance money for a Frisbee, a Hot Wheels racetrack or an edition of The Game of Life. Using that national seduction of the young as a backdrop, Heim personalizes it. The coach who abuses children thinks the same way as the Madison Avenue hotshots dreaming up the unattainable dreams thrown on TV screens around the country.

With tremendous understanding of the abused, Heim shows us people obsessed with UFOs, fragile people.

He also shows us people who appear strong, who throw themselves into street culture. I'm getting vague here because I don't want to give away the book.

I want you to read it.

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## **Bianca says**

It's been years since I first read *Mysterious Skin*, yet it remains the best example of two contrasting characters, two boys (and, eventually, men) who act as each other's foil and become vital to each other's characterizations and growth.

Brian and Neil are incredible, to me. I ache for them, I plead for them, I cry for them. The misfortune they share makes them tragic by default, but the separate paths they take to rediscover and face that haunting past is a journey I find remarkable and brilliant.

When I first read this book, I was disgruntled by the constant change in narration. We visit Neil, then Brian, then secondary characters whose importance I long debated. Many times, I wished the novel would stay with Neil, whose point-of-view I found most interesting. What I grew to understand upon rereading the novel was that Heim changes point-of-view with great, well-thought ambition. He is showing us, through the eyes of a variety of characters, how the devastations of Neil and Brian's youth have affected them and, because of that, no detail is ever censored. Relationships intertwine, and secondary characters prove significance.

The affection and devotion Neil felt for his coach surpasses the standard state of trauma in such a brutal situation. His love for his abuser makes him even more of a victim, taken advantage of by a man who undoubtedly knew how the boy felt. As Neil ages and the relationship ends, the piercing loneliness and abandonment he feels follows him, relentless to every effort he makes to better his life. Brian, meanwhile, appears to not have grown up. He's still a child, and he explores the uncertainty of his past with ideals better suited for a youth's imagination.

Neil's self-destruction and Brian's inability to erupt are so perfectly contrasted, and when they finally come face-to-face, the integrity in their connection is so poignant that I swear I can feel the emotions swelling through the book's pages.

In many ways, Hutchinson, Kansas feels like my home. The washed-up, dried-out town is flooded with familiarity, and Neil's need to escape was just as recognizable as Brian's struggle to leave. Hutchinson is the center of their pain; a perfect snapshot of something they—and I—are clutched onto with the desire to smother and kill.

Scott Heim, this is a masterpiece.

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### **Sofia says**

The needs of our survival make us, unconsciously or not, choose what to forget, what to remember, how to remember, when to remember.

Same action, different perspectives, different truths. It's part of the human condition how we experience the world so differently from each other. Nothing is black and nothing is white.

Uncomfortable read, not a book I enjoyed reading, the long term will tell me if I took anything from it. I do think that Heim's treatment of the subject matter, the uncomfortableness, the uncertainty, the obfuscation are right on the spot.

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### **Heather \*Awkward Queen and Unicorn Twin\* says**

That was heart-breaking and bleak.

But good. It was good, too. This kind of gave me the experience I wanted from *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*.

Sometimes the writing was a teensy bit awkward and some parts were slow, but ultimately this book was really effective. There's no skimping on horrifying details, so prepare yourself.

(I read the version with the cereal and spoons on the cover. Once I realized it came directly from a scene in the book, the image became grossly terrifying.)

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### **Taylor says**

I'm split on my opinion of this story, as tends to happen when I three-star a book. I can understand why it's received so many high ratings, and I would attribute that mostly to the ending. It leaves you emotionally overwhelmed, and it's almost enough to make you forget about the slow parts of the story. Almost.

The author explores the very different repercussions of childhood sexual trauma for two young boys. It's a heavy subject, and Heim does not shy away from the details of it. The reader is present for some explicitly



written sexual abuse of an eight year old, which does not make for an easy read. At the beginning I didn't think it was possible for a book of this subject matter to fall flat, but alas, it did. Part of the problem is that the chapters alternate POV between five different characters, yes *five*. All in first person. This despite the fact that the story really revolves around two characters, Neil McCormick and Brian Lackey. I found Neil's chapters kept my interest, while Brian's (concerning his UFO abduction theories) tended to drag on for me.

Overall, it's was a mildly intriguing read, but there's a movie adaptation with Joseph Gordon-Levitt that I've been told is amazing, and that might have been a better option for once.

ETA: Watched the movie adaptation. It was well done and cut out a lot of the sluggish parts of the story, while still following the book very closely. However, as to be expected, the book did a much better job conveying the full emotion of the characters and their experiences. It's worth reading.

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## **Marita Hansen says**

Possibly the best writer I have read, words don't convey how good this author is, and how thought provoking and chilling his tale of two boys is. Brian and Neil, total opposites in the spectrum of personalities have a common link: their little league coach, a man who through his actions has affected their lives considerably. You are given an account from when the boys are 8 right through to 19.

At the beginning of the story you get Brian's point of view, a confused eight-year-old who doesn't know what has happened to him after he is found in a cupboard at his home, scared and with a bleeding nose. Again, at ten he has another similar experience, where a chunk of his life is missing from his memory. After his first experience he starts getting nose bleeds, faints a lot and wets his bed, but his mother, although caring doesn't question it (other than pulls him out of baseball), and his father tells him off. Throughout the years, those missing hours and all the things that comes with it (the nosebleeds, dreams, etc.) leaves Brian with a desire to find out what really happened on those nights. In doing this, he gets into his head that aliens abducted him, his confused mind latching onto anything that could explain it. But gradually, when pieces start falling together he starts realising that there is a much more logical explanation, although horrifying and life shattering.

Neil knows what has happened to him, he's forgotten nothing, but sees it as good, the mind of a young boy not understanding that what was done was anything but loving. He comes to realise this at the end of the book, finally understanding how wrong it was through Brian. That last scene was so emotional, so sad, chilling, and scary as hell as a mother knowing that predators like the boys' coach are out there, ingratiating themselves so they can get what they want.

From the last scene in the film (which was also powerful and disturbing:

Neil on the left, Brian with the blond hair.

As I've said, Neil reacted differently to his involvement with his coach, and throughout the majority of the book remembers the man with love and affection. But it was clear that the coach's actions and the way he gave Neil money set the boy on the path of prostitution. Neil becomes promiscuous, seeking out older men, preferring them over people his own age when it comes to bed partners. But, it always comes with a price -

he hustles, something he enjoys until boredom leads him to New York, where a traumatic experience (and a harrowing scene) takes away an innocence he didn't know he had, making him hate sex for the first time.

Neil in this book, in all his beauty and sensuality, was the star here, as he was in the film with the same title. He was perfectly played by a young Joseph Gordon-Levitt seen below.

Neil is the one leaning out of the car, while the other boy acts as Eric, one of Neil's best friends, and the girl is Wendy, his other best friend, both also getting chapter view points in the book, Eric's being the more interesting of the two, because he shows us more of Brian and Neil's personalities. He's in love with Neil, but as said above, Neil is only interested in older, hairier men. Wendy also starts off having an infatuation with Neil, but realises quickly that Neil is gay, some of his actions shocking her. But this doesn't discourage her from forging on with their friendship, because he is so enigmatic and fascinating.

*Enigmatic* is definitely the right word for Neil, as it is for Brian also, because of the mystery behind their story. I wasn't sure how the title fitted in for a while, but by the end, or a bit prior to it, I realised what it meant and the picture on the cover of the book is so appropriate, and again the meaning is chilling, the blue light from the porch of the coach's old home shedding light (in more ways than one) on what happened to Brian and Neil.

As a overall assessment of this book, it was perfectly structured, giving the reader a mystery to start off with, leading them into wanting to know what happened to Brian and why he can't remember. We get pieces of the characters lives over an eleven year period. Some aspects were slow, more so in Brian's chapters, but, life isn't full speed all of the time, and these slower periods of the story were all needed, nothing in my opinion needing editing. Instead, the story was so realistic that the slower and faster periods for me played a perfect balance, allowing me to put the book down so I could enjoy it at a better pace, instead of whipping through it too fast ... plus I didn't want it to come to an end, because now it's over I really want to know more about Brian and Neil, to further read about their lives. Although there probably won't be, I hope there is a sequel.

On a note in regards to the writing style, all I can say is this author is brilliant. His writing is so beautiful, the structure of wording, how he describes scenes - it is all so poetic. I tend to skim or flick through descriptions of settings usually, but I didn't want to here, because it was just so beautifully rendered, a true masterpiece of skilled writing.

I will be thinking about this book for a long time, I don't think any book has affected me this much, both in its originality, the horrifying message to protect your children, the masterful and poetic rendering of text, the totally captivating characters... I will definitely be seeking this author's works out again. In my opinion, he is the best writer I have read, and as an author myself, I don't say that lightly.

Warning: It goes without saying, with the topic, that there is non consent in this book. But, even due to the difficulty of the theme and what Neil experiences at nineteen, the author does handle it with care.

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## **Heather says**

I wish I'd read this before seeing Gregg Araki's film - perhaps I would have appreciated its nuances more, but I already knew the travels, the revelations, the small, stinging heartbreaks. It's a hard and beautiful book, and it may just be one of the most faithful book-to-film adaptations I've ever seen. Heim's metaphors are unsullied with pretension: simple, precise, and evocative. He doesn't insult the reader with "deep" and "meaningful" character insights, instead allowing Brian and Neil to fumble their way through the looking glass and to each other, where answers lead to more questions. Just like life.

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## **Zweegas says**

It's difficult to say exactly what I like about this book. I don't exactly like the plot. I do like the characterizations, but this book does actually, firmly, clearly say some things that are taboo regarding pedophilia and sexual relationships between adult and children. This book goes beyond talking "about" taboos into actually making taboo statements. The adult / child sex scenes are graphic and intentionally creepy in the way that they're kind of sexy too. The story works with a kind of moral doubt. The kid wants it, or at least he thinks he does, and is more than happy to instigate sex with an adult he's attracted to. If this sort of thing were a Gregg Araki movie, I'd think it were outright exploitation -- hollow shock value applied to pedophilia.

I don't exactly like the way the book is written either with each character supposedly telling the story one chapter at a time. I just consider that they're all really one narrator telling one story while inhabiting several slightly different points of view. The main difference in the two main characters is obvious, but for such a big difference the voices of their narration doesn't seem all that different.

What I like about this book is the emotional reaction, the sympathy for the characters I feel that goes way beyond sympathy for just about any other literary characters ever. Maybe that emotional reaction could not have been achieved without the graphic plot going as far as it does. Maybe that emotional reaction could not have been achieved without first-person I-statement narration. It feels dangerous to read taboo literature, but the ending transcends shock value when I feel the danger that the characters are in (in so many ways) and I sincerely care about them and want to get them the help they deserve.

(My reading group's November / December 2008 book selection)

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## **Simon A. says**

A little too hip and trendy for its own good. I just don't buy that a 13 year old is this brooding and jaded. You don't need drugs and Joy Division until your at least 14. If you smoked cigarettes before you could drive, pimped your body before you passed Geometry and just laid back and sunk into your too kewl for school 'tude, well then...

Disclaimer: Some of the writing here is pretty tight in places, and I liked the format with different characters revealing different parts of the story... The plot was even pretty provocative and dramatic... I think it was

mainly that I couldn't relate to, believe in or care for the lead character's personality, predicament or attitude toward his situation.

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### **Evan says**

Brian closed his eyes, blood trailing down his cheek and matting his hair. I felt it, damp and warm, seeping through my pant leg. It was Brian's blood, and for some reason I knew it was pure. No other man I'd held in my arms---and now, not even I---had blood this pure. His eyes reopened, and he looked up at me. "Tell me, Neil," he said. "Tell me more."

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### **Will Byrnes says**

This is a very sharp-edged multiple coming of age novel. No Tom Sawyers here. Brian Lackey (and can't you tell what sort of person he is by his name?) wakes up in the crawlspace under his home one midnight when he is 8 years old, bloody, with no knowledge of what had happened to the last five hours.

Neil McCormick, afflicted with a floozy of a mother, finds a Playgirl under her bed one day, and realizes that it speaks directly to his undefined yearnings. He goes on to commit some terrible crimes under the influence of the evil Coach. Wendy Peterson has a crush on Neil and will follow him anywhere, which is definitely not a good thing. Brian's older sister, Deborah gets a voice late in the book as well. Eric Preston is attracted to the adolescent Neil and becomes involved with him.

### **Scott Heim - from Boston.com**

There is plenty of darkness to go around in Kansas of the 80s and early 90s, drunken abusive fathers, loose women, child molesters, adolescent hustlers and their clients, unspeakable cruelty to the helpless, and even a UFO. It made me uncomfortable at times reading this. I stuck it out because the diversity of views made the story-telling interesting. Heim has skill to go along with what must be a closet full of personal demons. This book was a bit overloaded with the horned creatures, but the skill still shone through. Events here occur on Halloween, although Heim stretches to include it, as the primary event occurs during the summer. It seems an afterthought that he creates a second event on Halloween for Brian. It seems as if he is trying to force his events into a structure regardless of how such stuffing affects the logic of the narrative.

There is some compelling referential imagery, as in when Brian is attempting to recover his lost time as a late teenager and is watching a scene from the Exorcist in which Regan's stomach displays the words "Help me." Second hand it may be, and perhaps a bit forced, but I thought it was ok here.

There is a seminal (yes, intended) scene late in which Neil is hustling in New York and is taken by an abusive john, raped and thrown away. It is meant to evince the damage done by Neil and Coach to the young boys they used, including Brian. Neil undergoes his change. Not all the characters grow here. Brian does, Neil does.

This was an engaging, if uncomfortable read. While the subject matter was harsh, the author's talent shines through.

=====EXTRA STUFF

The author's personal, myspace, FB, and Twitter pages

You can see the film on Youtube, but the quality is not very good.

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