



A Son Called Gabriel

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Set in the hills of Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 70s, *A Son Called Gabriel* is a deeply felt and often funny coming-of-age novel that is ultimately unforgettable. Gabriel Harkin, the eldest of four children in a working-class family, struggles through a loving yet often brutal childhood. It's a turbulent time in Ulster, and in the staunchly Catholic community to which Gabriel belongs, the strict rules for belief and behavior are clear. As Gabriel begins to suspect that he's not like other boys, he tries desperately to lock away his feelings, and his fears. But secrets have a way of being discovered, and Gabriel learns that his might not be the only ones in the Harkin family....Evoking a sense of time and place as compelling as *Angela's Ashes* and *At Swim, Two Boys*, Damian McNicholl's *A Son Called Gabriel* announces the arrival of a striking new literary voice.

A Son Called Gabriel Details

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Author : Damian McNicholl

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From Reader Review A Son Called Gabriel for online ebook

Kelly Such says

Although this book is predictable, I enjoyed the last quarter of the book and how it explained things and have hope for the future.

Julie Barnard says

Although I didn't think this was as good as the author's last book, it was well worth reading. Not easy though.

Tom says

This novel about a gay Catholic boy growing up in a rural town in Northern Ireland during the "time of troubles" quickly captures the reader's attention. The first-person narrative, laced with Irish idiomatic expressions, is charming and cheeky during Gabriel's grade-school years. But, as he grows older, he often comes off sounding like a drama queen as he goes through typical adolescent rebellion. The scenes of his furtive gay experimentation with cousins and school mates are at first humorous. Then, as he moves into puberty, he becomes miserable as he learns that the Church considers his innocent sex games to be mortal sins.

The plot gathers suspense as Gabriel gets an inkling that his Uncle Brendan, a seldom-seen priest stationed in Kenya, has a shady secret his family won't discuss. The secret gets revealed in the closing chapters, giving Gabriel a fresh wound to his fragile self-esteem. That, plus other subplots -- the Protestant girlfriend, the simmering friction with his father, outing himself to his mother, doctor and priest -- all get resolved too hastily and rather implausibly at the conclusion. As Gabriel gets ready for a fresh start by going off to England to attend college, still hiding his sexuality from his girlfriend, the reader senses he is being set up for a sequel. This is McNicholl's first novel, and we are told he is working on a second.

Fiona says

I read this for my in-person reading group and like many of the others we've read I hadn't heard of it before. It is set between the 1960's and 70's in Northern Ireland during a time of great conflict and strife between the Catholic and Protestants. This provides an interesting backdrop to Gabriel Harkin's own troubles and internal conflicts, when he slowly discovers that he is different to other boys.

Gabriel is a sensitive and intelligent young lad who is mercilessly bullied throughout school. Perhaps because of his unconscious knowledge that he is different, he is able to see the world around him more for what it is. McNicholl has a tendency to explain a lot of things to an unfamiliar reader if you aren't sure what O Levels are for example, and many of the arguments for and against the Irish troubles are explained through Gabriel's perspective.

Gabriel's discovery about his sexuality is slow and well paced. His emotions and feelings as they conflict with his religion, and the fear he will be rejected not only by God but his family are powerful and real. It's easy to empathise with Gabriel as he is an extremely likeable character. His family are very concerned about what their neighbours will think, never mind how their son felt. Sometimes I wanted to give certain members of his family a good slap for being so small minded.

The family dynamics, the relationships between Gabriel his parents and his siblings, between himself and his friends and the bullies are some of the things in this book I particularly enjoyed. They all felt very real and I enjoyed how they developed and changed as Gabriel grew up from being a child to a young man. His changing perspective and understanding of his family and himself as he grew up were subtle and very well written.

It is an easily accessible and well written book overall that makes for some easy, though not too light reading. Gabriel is a wholly likeable character and you want to follow him and see how he gets on after the novel has ended. That is to me, always the sign of a good book.

Luka says

Wow! Firstly; I was expecting the ending to reveal Gabriel's uncle Brendan's concealed (but hinted at) homosexuality, instead I was completely thrown to learn Brendan was in fact Gabriel's father!

I am prone to 'coming of age' novels and this was no exception. I thoroughly enjoyed the authors writing style. I found it very intimate and personal. This enabled me to quickly get into the novel. I liked the picture he painted of Northern Ireland in the mid 60's, gruff, run down but cosy living surroundings.

The family bonds, secrets and conflicts drew me in and I found this a realistic depiction of family life.

Gabriel's voice was often a pained one and I felt it easy to empathise with his adolescent pains. His deep rooted confusion/guilt/shame, repressed anger, resentment over his strict religious upbringing what's more, angst concerning his brewing sexuality and at times, rampant desires.

One qualm I have is that the ending was rushed, just as we had been subjected to a shocking (through my eyes) twist, the tale was spun and merely paragraphs left until the end.

I had invested in Gabriel and in Brendan too,(I believe, the only grown up who was consistently patient and considerate in his treatment towards Gabriel.) I was curious to know the outcome, how their relationship would now further develop after such a revelation? But was denied this with the ending cut short. A sequel could work well, with the author's writing style reading like a biography of sorts.

Erastes says

This book struck a lot of chords for me, and I found myself reading it in one session because I simply couldn't put it down. Being raised myself by a Catholic mother with the same values and standards as Gabriel's mother–don't shame the family, don't show yourself up, don't give in to bullies, always look nice,

study hard, do better—I could empathize with everything in this story.

Gideon is a normal little boy—until he starts to worry that he isn’t. He’s about six at the start of the book and going to school. Or at least, he decides he’s not going to school because he’s being bullied.

The choice was school or the big stick and seemed easy to make. My younger sister Caroline and any boy in the whole of Ireland would choose school, but I knew I was right in refusing to go.

No, he’s not the most self-aware boy in Ireland, he’s just not into sports. However that’s enough of a reason for Henry Lynch to pick on Gabriel and when pushed to the point of fighting, and then backing down he realises that he’s never going to be able to fight—which makes matters worse. There are gradual hints as he gets older that he’s not like the other boys in his immediate circle which he doesn’t understand.

In this respect I was reminded of William Golding’s *The Inheritors*, or more recently, Terry Pratchett’s *Nation* where someone tries to understand a way of life that in many ways makes no sense at all. Gabriel’s so desperate to fit in; but there are things that even he’s not aware of that make him stand out.

Don’t go thinking that this is a bleak and tragic story. It could easily have gone that way, but there’s a bubbling exuberance that buoys it up, and a streak of black humour running through it which saves it from irremediable emo.

As an example, Lynch picks on Gabriel at the funfair. Gabriel is wearing purple jeans, jeans he begged his mother to buy him, and of course, they are unlike anyone else’s jeans. Gabriel is stripped by the bullies and saved by the girls—who he plays with at school. A dreadful situation but the sting is taken out of it when his cousin remarks that she’s seen her brother’s thing a hundred times and Gabriel’s is no different.

The book is full of childhood smut, like this. Children experiment with sex, and these children are no different, so if you are averse to children playing doctors and nurses (in one case quite delightfully with Gabriel and his male cousin) then this isn’t the book for you. But it’s not presented in any titilaating way—simply as a fact of life, because that’s what children do. They learn “bad words” and keep them from their parents because they know they shouldn’t know them.

In this respect is a lovely nostalgic read, children certainly being more innocent than they are today.

As would be expected in the time and place, religion plays a strong part in the book, and Gabriel is buffeted between the Church and his family when he learns the confusing facts of how to deal with confession. “Tell the priest the truth.” “Don’t you dare tell the priest anything about this family.” and other impossible matters. He’s often punished for telling the truth, when it’s discovered that he tells the truth about a lie he told earlier.

When Gabriel really begins to realise what might be “wrong” with him, that’s when the tone of the story changes and he struggles with his possible homosexuality with all of his might. The book could have spiralled into despair at this point, but it’s Gabriel’s tenacity and—even more importantly, the strength and solidity of his family that prevent this.

His family are every piece as important in this, and I came to know and love (and dislike!) all of them. Anyone with a largish family will be able to take something away from this, the nice grannie, the not so nice grannie, the embarrassing aunt, the brother no-one talks about... and so on.

I don’t know if the author is planning a series of books about Gabriel, but I hope so. The book ends with him

just about to leave Ireland for London, and it seems perfectly set for a sequel. I'll certainly be getting it if so.

I think many people will find something to take away in this book—especially if they were raised in the 1960s and 70s. As a debut novel, it's a terrific read, and anyone with an interest in this era will find it absorbing – and I'm sure, as unputdownable as I did.

Patrick says

Every gay stereotype is served by the main character. Why are gays in books always afraid of hard work, want to be a hairdresser, are not into sports and are members of a drama clubs. Beside that, it's a nice book.

Geoff says

I wasn't sure about this book going into it. One of the best books I've read this year was *The Absolutist* by John Boyne, which is the story of a young gay man coming of age written by an Irish author; and one of my all time favorite books is *At Swim, Two Boys* by Jamie O'Neill, which is the story of a young gay man coming of age written by an Irish author.

Overall I was completely underwhelmed until the last 15-20 pages of the book. I think McNicholl did a great job portraying working class Northern Ireland and interlacing just enough of the political landscape to keep the focus on the main character and not the conflict, but I just couldn't get into it. I didn't feel like Gabriel was a sympathetic character and I just kept wanting to tell him to shut up. I honestly kept thinking, good grief I hope I wasn't that annoying when I was his age (even though I'm sure I was more-so).

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Joe Repice says

Very sensitive book. I really enjoyed it.

Robert Rice says

Robert Rice

A Son Called Gabriel

I would recommend this book to people who want to understand more of what happened during this time period. I think the author wrote this to enlighten the reader of the life's of everyday Irish people and the hardships some endure. "Her ability to reverse herself and stand up for Father was truly astonishing" because it showed that even though she was mad at him she still wanted to protect him. I felt sorrow for the main character for all the trouble he has been through. My favorite character was the main character, Gabriel, because of his perseverance. I did not like Henry because he was always mean to Gabriel for stupid things. When the book got into the school being harsh part is when I got hooked into the book and got my attention the most. The book had foreshadowing for the ending so it made it easier to predict the ending of this book.

If this book was made into a movie I would choose my old friend Mitchell because he fits the description of the main character of this book very well. I kept reading the book because I thought it exploited its strengths very well.

James says

This is a gentle story narrated by young Gabriel Harkin, the son of the title, who lives in Northern Ireland during the 1960s and 70s. A young boy in 1964 when the novel begins, his story is one of growing up during the time of the "troubles" which provide a subtle background for his personal experience of dealing with his own homosexuality. He does well enough in school, but is not a scholar, and from the beginning he does not fit in either at school or at home. The novel traces his gradual discovery of why this is, and his homosexuality is only one of the reasons. How he deals with his growing awareness of his sexuality is one source of suspense in the story. At the same time his family gradually prospers financially even as the violence of the "troubles" grows ever more menacing in the background. This novel is quiet and understated, but it has just the right tone for the story. There is additional suspense primarily due to a subplot regarding Gabriel's Uncle Brendan who is away from home at the beginning of the story. He returns and the result of that event along with the growing political clamor provides sufficient action to keep the reader interested until Gabriel's story comes to its climactic close.

Dave says

Nothing new to be learned from this one. Every cliche under the sun woven together and not particularly well.

Cami says

I feel like I've read a different book than the one advertised. As in, I was lead to believe this was an enjoyable, gay, coming-of-age story. It's really not; as I saw another review say, it's more of a "these things happened, and in this order," with no real effect on the plot.

And it ends awfully. If taken at face value--and the author has not given us any reason to believe it shouldn't be--this queer young man believes he's going to be happy in London with his girlfriend, and that he's "leaving for a new beginning," and is looking forward to no longer being queer. What kind of bullshit is that?

Anyway, I read it over the course of a few days, and I'd classify it as a slog. I would recommend not wasting your time.

Charles says

I was disappointed by this book. I'd seen it compared to *At Swim Two Boys*, presumably because it's set in Ireland and has a gay protagonist, but really the two books have nothing at all in common. ASCG doesn't

even read like a novel; it's more like one of those rather worthy over-detailed confessional affairs, in which everything that's there is there *because it happened* and not because it makes much narrative sense. There's very little narrative sense to be had in this book, in which one thing follows another and, well, that's it. The author says it's not autobiographical and I suppose we have to believe him, but it has the feel of barely digested truths, as though the authority of the book depended on its authenticity. I wasn't convinced. I found it shapeless and over-larded with whimsical but unnecessary detail. It cried out for editing. In other words, I didn't like it at all.

Paul Trainor says

About a third of the way through Damian McNicholl's debut novel, his chief protagonist seems to have his prayers answered, and I did too, for it was then that the novel finally got hold of me and kept me with it to the end. The first third unfairly dallied that it would be a run-of-the-mill depressing tale of shoeless drunken Ireland a la Angela's Ashes but patience brought good things just like the saying predicts.

Having grown up in Northern Ireland at exactly the same time as Gabriel, I found a lot of it very familiar; his mother was my mother, his father my father, and the relationship between his brother and father scary in how it mirrored similar events in my house. Ultimately a coming of age tale of youngster's realization of his homosexuality, the parallel of being a catholic in troubled and prejudicial Ireland is somewhat underplayed.

The ending (with an unsuspecting twist) seems rather rushed, and although overall a fascinating insight into the troubled mind of accepting homosexuality, I was left somehow feeling that there was a lot of other threads that did not have proper closure.

I have been working on a story for several years that is set almost on the same stage and era —different central theme— and I was impressed at how Damian brought me back to Ireland in the early seventies. I brought it more alive, to add to lot of my own memories scattered in my notebooks, and as Gabriel might say, I want to write more about it fierce bad.
