



## How to Survive a Summer

*Nick White*

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**A debut novel centering around a gay conversion camp in Mississippi, and a man's reckoning with the trauma he faced there as a teen.**

Camp Levi nestled in the Mississippi countryside is designed to "cure" young teenage boys of their budding homosexuality. Will Dillard, a Midwestern graduate student, spent a summer at the camp as a teenager, and has since tried to erase that experience from his mind. But when a fellow student alerts him that a slasher movie based on the camp is being released, he is forced to confront his troubled history and possible culpability in the death of a fellow camper.

As past and present are woven together, Will recounts his "rehabilitation," eventually returning to the abandoned campgrounds to solve the mysteries of that pivotal summer, and to reclaim his story from those who have stolen it. With a masterful confluence of sensibility and place, *How to Survive a Summer* introduces an exciting new literary voice."

## How to Survive a Summer Details

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Author : Nick White

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Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Glbt, Queer, Gay, Did Not Finish

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## From Reader Review How to Survive a Summer for online ebook

### Cody | codysbookshelf says

#### Release Date: 06.11.17

2.5 stars rounded up

In essence, this is a paint-by-numbers "hometown boy returns" literary release. It just isn't special in any way. Don't get me wrong; this author obviously has talent and some passages have power, but on the whole I was bored out of my skull. The premise of this one is very intriguing (hence my requesting an ARC from Netgalley), but the plot meanders and is just so sloooooow.

Things this book does right: it adequately shows the horror of gay conversion therapy, without feeling too gimmicky or cheap. In fact, Will's flashbacks to the summer of '99 — the time he spent at that camp — were great, and I only wish the entire novel (except for the beginning and end, I suppose) took place then. Will as a teenager is fascinating to read about, and the writing feels really electric in those chapters.

Things this book does wrong: almost everything else. Adult Will is totally unbearable, as are the people he surrounds himself with. I found myself skimming the parts concerned with Will's journey back home just to get to the flashbacks.

Overall, this is a very 'meh' novel. It had so much potential, and it's unfortunate the author doesn't really take advantage of it. Ah, well. I don't regret reading it, but I will never revisit this one.

*Thanks to Netgalley and the publisher for the ARC, which was given in exchange for an honest review.*

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### Kai says

*"You never know how bad you look until you see yourself in the eyes of other people."*

Well, this was a disappointment. I was looking forward to a new voice in the LGBTQ genre, but this really wasn't for me.

I struggled with this book, I really did. I don't like leaving books unfinished, even more so if it is an ARC. How am I to judge a book when I haven't read it? So I made myself pick this up again and get through with it, in the hope that it might get better. That there would be a turning point. But sadly there wasn't.

The two things that bothered me the most were the main character and the bland and slow-paced plot. Will is not a likeable main character. Not that he is a mean guy, not at all. But he's a coward. He always comes late, doesn't call back or answer his phone his phone in the first place. He chickens out and doesn't confront anyone with anything, least of all himself. This behaviour is maddening and the result is a story that doesn't move forward.

The side characters aren't much better. Bevy is the only character that feels alive. Everybody else seems distant, cold or simply weird.

The things Will and the other boys from the gay reversion camp went through were terrible, yes, but since the whole story is uncomfortable and wearisome, it didn't make me feel anything.

This could have been a great novel if the story had been more intriguing and the characters more likeable. Personally, I can't recommend this book. It was grey, slow and painful to read.

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### **Ema says**

I wanted to love this book so much more than I did, but it was unfortunately juveniley written and hard to slough through.

One character aptly assumes at one point that our narrator doesn't want to talk about his story because he may feel it's just another example of a gay boy growing up and getting out of a small town, moving from a rural area to a metropolitan area and not terribly worthy of sharing. This was the most poignant moment of the novel, because I think a lot of people do feel this way when they should know that their perspective is also important.

I don't know. I was so psyched for this book but it didn't captivate me or compel me. It wasn't as gruesome as promised, not that I wanted to see gruesome specifically, but I expected there to be more shock factor for how the book was sold. There was one character who was very fucked up and I think that this was much more the problem in the story than the idea of "stomping out the gay."

I feel like there could have been more. Will's current life is very strange and aimless and could have better been written into its own story. His relationships with a guy he's interested in and a friend who's more a mentor were both very strange and were described as more intimate than they really are.

I kept getting bored and wanting to give up. Ultimately, the ending was super unsatisfying also, and I was left in limbo wondering what I had just read. While I think this topic matter is important, I would have liked to see this story differently done in a manner that would be much more captivating. I felt like the title was false advertisement, honestly.

This was disappointing. If you're interested in the topic manner it might be worth your time, but it was far from the slamdunk I was hoping this would pull on my emotions.

I received a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

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### **Aj Sterkel says**

I don't like judgmental people in real life or in fiction. The narrator got on my nerves way too much. I'm giving up.

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### **Jane Shambler says**

This was a hard read. It was slow and you felt like you were walking through sludge. It took me three months to finish this book. I refuse to give up on a book but I nearly did with this one.

The author does have a promise as there are some paragraphs offering powerful messages. But, the majority of the book was hard going.

The book is about camps people sent their children to, to Pray Away The Gay. Are they serious? These Gay conversion camps DON'T WORK. You know that, I know that. Ok I admit it's a worthy topic. But I can't say that this author was the right person to tell this story. Don't ask! I really don't know its just the way I feel.

I tried to like this book. I really did try. If these camps actually happen and from what I've read they do. All I can do is shake my head and swear A LOT!

Would I recommend this book? I really don't know how I can. It was just so slow. I gave it 1.5 stars rounded up to 2 but I even think that's generous.

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\*ARC provided by publisher via NetGalley\*

### **Casey says**

I saw Nick White in conversation with Garrard Conley at Book Culture on Columbus earlier this summer, which was terrific and hilarious. The two had so much to say about growing up in Southern American religious communities, the myriad ways some of us escape those childhoods, and long-lasting effects that stick with us in adulthood. I'm so fortunate I was able to be there. Oh, and also, they were hilarious and I had a lovely chat with them as they signed my books. As I said, fortunate.

Despite these similar backgrounds, *How to Survive a Summer* tells its fiction story in a much different fashion than Conley's *Boy Erased: A Memoir*.

This is a weaving, pained story that delays getting into the history much like a person with PTSD might do. It's a smart way to circuitously unfurl information to your reader, although for me it was sometimes too long in getting there. However, some passages in the novel are gripping and unique. For instance, I won't complain at all about the surprise slasher flick described at length... because who doesn't love that?

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For more LGBTQ+ recommendations, check out the shelves on my profile. I even keep a favorite queer reads front-and-center!

### **Danny says**

In this book there is a traumatic summer for a group of boys at a gay conversion camp. Later on that traumatic summer is dramatized and refashioned into a completely unrecognizable slasher movie "inspired by real events" and some of the characters who experienced those events are upset about that.

And yet...my main criticism of this book is that it needs to be edited down and made more cinematic. I don't need a slasher, but I need a hook to get into your story.

The pace is ponderous, which is its main problem, but also the dribs and drabs of information you get come in such a strange order that it's often hard to care.

"Pick a plot. Focus on it. Try again." -- what the terrible editor apparently never said.

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### **Doug says**

It pains me to say this, especially after reading an interview with the author in 'Rolling Stone', which corroborates his good intentions - but White's book is just NOT very good - and since I harbored notions of abandoning it several times, I can't really give it more than two stars. As with many (most?) debut efforts, the author tries to cram in too much plot and too many superfluous details that slow the story down to a painful slog - it could have easily jettisoned over a hundred pages, which would have made it a much more compelling read.

Aside from those deficiencies, the structure resembles the ramblings of an ADHD afflicted child, and the prose rarely is elevated above the pedestrian. A noble effort on a difficult, painful and sadly, still relevant subject - but White's reach far exceeds his grasp.

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### **Kristen says**

As a queer person raised deeply Southern Baptist, the experiences described in *How to Survive a Summer* rang unfortunately true. I never attended the kind of conversion camp that Will does, but I was a fixture at church camp every summer, and I certainly internalized all kinds of nonsense about myself and other queer people because of that. When we first meet Will, he's still working through all of the shit from his past, brought back to the surface by the release of a horror film taking place at the camp where he endured so many traumatic experiences.

I felt that White's exploration of Will's parallel stories--his story to find himself in his return to Mississippi, and the story of what exactly happened that summer at camp--was effective, particularly in how it evokes the way trauma shatters our memories and minds. It's hard to approach such a painful event in a linear fashion, and so the structure of flashbacks in this novel really worked for me. I've seen a few reviews complaining of the "juvenile" writing style, but I have to say it didn't bother me at all. Will is in a state of arrested development; he's never really been able to move on from the events of the past, no matter how much he's tried. So it makes sense, then, that his writing would be somewhat childlike. He hasn't been able to progress.

This is not a perfect novel, but maybe because of my personal connection to the subject, I found it extremely compelling and moving. I look forward to reading whatever Nick White writes next.

I won an ARC of this book in a Goodreads giveaway. Thanks to Goodreads, blue rider press, Penguin Random House, and Nick White for the ARC.

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## **julia says**

### **4.0 Stars.**

Another audiobook - seems like this is becoming a summer of listening rather than reading. First and foremost I have to say that I couldn't stand the narrator of this one. He didn't have an awful voice or a terrible reading style, so I can't really pinpoint what my exact problem is - it just didn't click with me.

Still, I listened to the whole book and I enjoyed it quite a bit. The premise was interesting from start to finish and I liked the way White organised the plot. I didn't think it too slow and I appreciated the glimpses not only into Will's past but into his family's history, too. When I finally got to the part of the book that was describing life in Camp Levi I was a bit disappointed - in my opinion, it was too short and rushed and not quite disturbing enough. Which, that is weird to say, but that's how I felt. After the build-up I guess I just expected worse.

My only real complaint, which is actually the case with many of my recent books, is that I didn't really enjoy any of the characters. They were kind of flat and rather unlikeable, especially Will's bitchy lesbian friend who's name I forgot. I just want characters that I can relate to, and relating doesn't just mean sexual orientation. You're not done once your book includes a gay, lesbian and transgender character. They also need to *have* a character.

All in all a solid book.

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## **Laurel says**

When Will Dillard, aka Rooster, was in his teens, his father sent him to Camp Levi, a conversion therapy camp in the Neck, an isolated area in central Mississippi. Therapy is a misnomer for what actually happens to the young men placed by their parents in the hands of Father Drake and Mother Maude, the camp's leaders. After a tragedy occurs, the camp disbands and the campers go their separate ways.

Will, now a graduate student, believes himself to have moved on from that summer. But then a horror movie, "Proud Flesh," based very loosely on that summer's events is released and inserts itself into his life. Will begins a road trip, both mentally and physically, back into his past as he returns to the place where it all began.

How to Survive a Summer has a lot of potential and the topic it tackles, gay conversion therapy camps, is certainly weighty and worthwhile, but I never felt it achieved the depth it deserves nor did the characters become much more than caricatures. It was a good try, but I was disappointed.

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## **Emily Polson says**

"...I learned the past is not *the past*, a lump of time you can quarantine and forget about, but a reel of film in your brain that keeps on rolling, spooling and unspooling itself regardless of whether or not you are watching it."

Will Dillard's story takes place in two timelines: his childhood in the Mississippi Delta, leading up to his summer in a gay conversion camp, and his life as a graduate film student, learning about a movie based on that summer and deciding to confront his past with a southbound road trip. There are two story arcs at play, the details of his childhood and summer at the camp revealed slowly as his present-day roadtrip helps to settle formerly unresolved emotions. I loved the complicated relationships: between parents and children, between former campers, between the film director and those whose story he was telling.

The narrative is slow-moving, particularly in the beginning, but I liked it--the author captures that feeling of summers in the Deep South, when it's too hot and humid to do anything fast. He utilizes elements of Southern Gothic storytelling and details about small-town Delta life that bring a necessary depth to Will's actions in both the past and present. That said, there are moments of page-turning anticipation--particularly as the details of the summer camp emerge near the end.

I picked up this book because of this review by a friend of mine. I skimmed over it again after finishing the book, and found her remarks rang true, particularly her comment that this is "is an intentionally villain-less story." While the plot of the novel reveals a major wrongdoing, the people behind it come from a variety of backgrounds and motivations, which means even the worst of them is painted with strokes of empathy. Will's homophobic father also cares deeply about racially integrating his church. The camp directors spent time in New York helping those stricken with AIDS. There is redemption and forgiveness in this story, the strongest of all being self-forgiveness, when Will remarks on "my own worst desire, which turned out not to be my attraction to the same gender but my longing to obliterate myself completely and remake something new and wholesome in its place."

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### **Erica Chilson says**

DNF @57% = automatic 3 stars

Writing style not for me. It was written as a stream of consciousness, but the narrative would go off on a side quest, get lost there for a bit, before journeying back to the original point being made. The only problem is how the reader forgot what the original point being shown was. As for the story itself, the writing style muddied it, burying it beneath the way it was written. Storyteller narrative, all told, not shown.

But that wasn't my biggest issue. Early on in the novel, the reader meets Zeus, and his backstory is told via conversation, and this rubbed me wrong. I tried three more times after that to get into the story, trying to forget my earlier irritation, but I didn't succeed.

I'm unsure if I should post my thoughts on how the author created Zeus, afraid it will be taken the wrong way with insult being seen where none was meant, but I was personally insulted by Zeus' backstory.

I had a problem with the character of Zeus, to the point I couldn't read the novel after I became hyper-focused. To go through the transition from female to male is admirable and brave, especially after coming out as a lesbian. What I couldn't swallow...

As a female, she was a lesbian = / = as a male, he is gay.

That does not equate.

There was no indecision, no in the closet (actually, when female, she would have been straight if gay as a male, attracted to the male gender). No in denial. To make a conscious choice to come out as a lesbian, which by very definition means you are attracted to the female gender, not the male gender, that is not an easy choice to be made. A lot of soul-searching, self-reflection, and being attracted to the female gender. Then to struggle with your gender identity, which is both courageous and no doubt terrifying. But once the transition occurred from FtM, Zeus changed his sexual inclination as if it's not something innate in our beings. After struggling to come out as a lesbian (wanting women), as a male, he decides he's gay (wanting men).

The gender you are attracted to does not change with your gender identity. Apples/oranges.

Bisexuality and pansexuality are more fluid, not necessarily wanting genders equally. When gay/lesbian/straight, it's more rigid, wanting a specific gender, or you wouldn't be gay/lesbian/straight by very definition.

Transitioning changes what you call your sexual orientation based on your gender vs the gender you are attracted toward, not the specific gender you're attracted to. When Val, she wanted females = / = when Zeus, he wanted males- this erased all the progress we've made, which was ironic in a book featuring a conversion camp which also believed it was a choice. Who you are attracted to is not a choice.

Zeus' character made it seem as if it's a choice. When deciding to live as his true gender, he also decided to change which gender he is attracted to, making it seem as if the decision she was lesbian was a frivolity- a lie. A mockery. We can be in denial when saying we're straight, because of societal pressure, but to go through all the soul-searching to come out as a lesbian, as if it's easy... "My therapist made me realize I'm a gay man." There never would have been a struggle with sexual orientation (straight, not lesbian) as he struggled with his gender identity (FtM) gay male.

No matter how intrigued I was by Will's story, not put off by his personality or how difficult it was to fall into the story itself due to the stream of consciousness writing style, when Zeus' name was on the page, I got angry.

This visceral reaction is why I chose to not finish, instead of continuing on until the end.

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## Hot for Literature says

Will Dilliard is a grad student writing his dissertation in film studies when he hears about a trendy new slasher film sweeping theatres across the nation. This film is based on a true story, his story, of Camp Levi, a camp designed to "cure" young boys of homosexuality. Growing up as a young teenage boy in rural Mississippi, Will discovered his sexuality while navigating the religious environment that surrounded him. His father, a devout Christian, suspicious and callous of Will's identity, sent him to Camp Levi in hopes of "rehabilitating" him. Will himself, was heartbreakingly in agreement with his father, desperate for God to help him. Now as an adult, the past traumas of Will's childhood prevent him from forming meaningful relationships and friendships, and he remains as lost as ever. The release of the film finally causes Will to face his past, and his possible role in the death of a fellow camper.

Nick White's debut novel truly dug deep into a dark history that many young people have faced. This

fictional story sent me on a bit of a rollercoaster of emotion, because as history tells us, a story like this isn't quite entirely fictional. The writing is genius, and Will's character development is slow, steady, and undeniably believable. Was it a little dry at times? Yes. Is the whole, big-city-boy-returns-to-home-town-to-find-himself storyline a little overdone? Yes. But somehow this book had a bit of a different spin on the idea: The Neck. This is what made the book for me. I was immediately drawn into concurrent storylines: Will as his past self, and as his current self. The ways in which these two perspectives are woven together truly helps to explain Will's thoughts and behaviours. Overall, this book was heartbreakingly, painfully, and satisfyingly in the end.

Thank you to Curtis Brown Publishing Ltd. for sending me this advanced readers copy! Keep your eyes peeled for this book being published in June.

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### **Camille Dent says**

As someone who grew up as a queer Mississippian, the people portrayed in this book were all too familiar to me. Nick White's writing is compellingly and unfortunately accurate. The protagonist is frustrating much of the time, but I also understood a lot of his actions. He is not the gay caricature usually portrayed in fiction, so it was nice to see a different perspective that's more similar to me.

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### **Lauraadriana says**

I really enjoyed this book. The book had a bit of a meta feel to it, which really worked to its benefit I think, and made it a more compelling read for me. It was hard and sad, but it felt so genuine and raw that I could not help but feel for Will Dillard. We meet Will right when he finds out that very dark part of his adolescence has been made into a horror movie. Literally one of the worst times of his life was now a slasher flick, and it sends him into a tailspin. That secret and pain he has been pushing down and ignoring for ten years has finally come for him.

Will has been barely living for the last decade, he was in doctoral program he had no desire to see through, he barely had any friends, he was like a ghost. Living life in a fog of apathy and disdain. He was careless with the few people in his life that cared for him, and the rest he had pushed away.

His father, that was a no-go. Being the gay son of a Baptist preacher, was going to have its complications, and the wound that had opened when the camp his dad sent him to "rehabilitate" him of his unnatural desires had ended in tragedy never healed. Amends where never made, he just shut his dad out, had not time to look back, until the movie. He can't escape it, no matter what he does he is drawn to watch it, to relive memories he has worked so hard to bury.

On a whim he gets on the road back to Mississippi to visit the old ghosts of his past, and there are many. He has to make peace with the memory of this mother, the love he had for her and the pain of her loss. He wanted to see the other boys who had endured those horrible four weeks in Delta. He wanted to go back to the place and finally put it all to rest. What ensues is a strange and painful journey that allows Will to finally be free.

I found the story not only compelling, incredibly thoughtful and deep. The inner struggle in Will, of needing to be the son his father wanted, even when he knew it was impossible. The pain and guilt he carried for the things he did to try and be that boy he just could never be. Were heartbreaking.

Also I think the author does a really amazing job of portraying the effects of trauma. The fog that Will existed in, how every ounce of his energy was spent in keeping all the monsters of his past at bay. How forcing himself not to remember the powerlessness of the camp experience robbed him of the ability to feel anything at all.

To reclaim his life he had finally face what was taken from him, and he had to try and see the people who had lived through that summer with him for what they were, fellow survivors. I liked that the author was not trying to create heroes or villains in this story, he was just trying to save Will from himself and give him a shot at a fuller life. The messed up things and the bad choices would always be there, but the ability to live a life with meaning was all there for him.

The storytelling is also dynamic and blends in lots of elements I really loved, a strong sense of place, an almost fairy tale feeling for the parts when Will talked about the stories his mom told him as child, and even the horror scenes were rendered with a lot of skill.

I look forward to more from Nick White.

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### **Monica says**

I found this novel to be an engaging and compelling read, despite the difficult subject matter. The writing drew me in, and I appreciated the use of the simultaneously mythic and mundane to expose the horrific realities of “pray away the gay” movements.

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### **Amanda Mae says**

This is yet another case of a book finding me at just the right time. The character of Will reminds me of a few young men I've known, and his journey in this book intrigued me, baffled me, impressed me, and comforted me. There's hints of southern gothic, to give you a taste and keep you guessing. At times I wished I had a book just of those stories that Will's mother told him, and it got my writer mind churning with possibilities.

I could see how some readers might find the story too jumbled to be enjoyed, but it was the jumpy storyline that pulled me in. Each layer of the story got me more invested, and by the near end I was literally at the edge of my seat, anxious to know what would happen next, and I seemed to feel what the characters were feeling as it all came out. I feel like this is a book and a story that some LGBTQ youth may find engaging enough to help them muddle through complex emotions and their own journeys of self discovery.

I know this is a book I'll be thinking about for awhile.

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## Laura says

I enjoyed this for the most part. It mainly **deals with Will's traumatic memories** of his time at a gay conversion camp which was heartbreaking to read about. Again, in the beginning I found it hard to get into. There's the initial hook in the first chapter but then the **proceeding 5-6 chapters were just really hard to get through** for me. The book also deals in **past and present** (the story is being told in the present and Will remembers things from his past relating to that summer) and **I loved the switches back and forth**. It was very easy to follow and it was a good choice of the author's to have the past directly told rather than the reader just getting it second hand as a memory. As for the characters themselves, I loved how White didn't portray the people of the camp as these faceless, evil, religious people. They had a past (which was included) and that **made it clear that everyone has a past and has reasons for what they do, even if it seems evil to others**. I also had the opportunity to hear Nick White speak (he went to graduate school with my professor) which was a great experience.

### The Final Verdict:

Make it through the beginning exposition: the ending is completely worth it. The characters are very well fleshed out and the structure is put together nicely.

**4 stars**

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## Larry H says

I'm stuck between 3.5 and 4 stars, but I'll round up.

"In the summer of 1999, when I was fifteen years old, I spent almost four weeks at a camp that was supposed to cure me of my homosexuality. Though I changed in many ways at Camp Levi, my desires—to the grief of everyone involved—did not."

Will Dillard is a graduate student in college working on his dissertation in film studies. He cannot seem to stay in a romantic relationship; in fact, even maintaining friendships is fairly difficult unless the other person is satisfied with a relatively one-sided relationship on which they'll have to expend most of the effort.

It's not that Will thinks he's better than others, or likes being anti-social—he just finds it difficult to remain present all the time, because he is constantly fighting to hide the traumas he sustained during a summer he spent at a gay "conversion" camp. He's never told anyone the entire story of his experience there, and he's always lived a relatively solitary life.

But when a horror movie about the camp, which has as its roots a memoir written by someone he knew from that summer, is released, and starts catching on, Will can't escape the trauma or his secrets. He knows his refusal to deal with these issues is the roadblock keeping him from truly confiding in and loving someone, but the thought of dredging up those memories is more than he can bear. Yet when he decides to head home to Mississippi to try and see his estranged father, a former preacher, the feelings of self-hatred and guilt come swarming back.

"I learned the past is not *the past*, a lump of time you can quarantine and forget about, but a reel of film in your brain that keeps on rolling, spooling and unspooling itself regardless of whether or not you are watching it."

After encountering two of his fellow campers and one former counselor, all of whom were part of the events of that traumatic summer, Will decides the only thing he can do is go back to the deserted campsite and confront what happened as well as his own complicity in those events. At the same time he must come to term with his own identity, the family secrets he has tried to keep hidden and those he has tried to embrace, and the path he has followed since then.

Nick White's ***How to Survive a Summer*** is at times a searingly emotional look at how hard it can be to embrace and love who you are when you are told that who you are is an abomination, and you must change. It's also a powerful story of finally finding the courage to trust others and yourself in order to move past paralyzing trauma.

There were times, however, that the plot meandered off course, veering too much into the stories Will's mother told him about the mysterious, courageous women who lived in the strange area she grew up in. There was even a point in which I thought the book might become a horror story. Luckily, White pulled his plot back together, getting back to Will's journey to confront his demons and deal with his past once and for all.

White is a very talented writer—sometimes the most emotion in his story occurs during the quieter, purer moments than where you might expect them to come. He wasn't afraid to make Will somewhat unsympathetic in his treatment of those who care about him, but yet you still want to understand his story.

There were times, of course, where just the thought of what was being done to these kids was simply horrifying; the fact that it is 2017 now and there are many (including the U.S. vice-president) who believe "gay conversion" should still be used disgusts me. But it is a credit to White's strength as a storyteller that the book wasn't as maudlin or upsetting as I feared.

NetGalley and PENGUIN GROUP Blue Rider Press & Plume provided me an advance copy of the book in exchange for an unbiased review. Thanks for making this available!

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blogspot.com>....

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