



All the Truth I Can Stand

Mason Stokes

Calkins Creek (Nov 5, 2024)

Hardcover \$18.99 (256pp)

978-1-66268-088-5

A gay high school senior confronts the tragic murder of his beloved in Mason Stokes's novel *All the Truth I Can Stand*.

Ash, still grieving his deceased mother, joins the backstage of his local college's *Oklahoma!* production. He befriends straight-talking Jenna and falls in love with her best friend, vivacious starring actor Shane. When Shane is beaten and killed during the last of his mysterious disappearances from town, sorrowful Ash and Jenna seek the truth behind his death.

Ash is a heartfelt narrator whose voice is aggrieved and deadpan: "when you smell something, you're literally taking the particles of that thing—a flower, a dead squirrel, shit—into your nostrils. I wanted to [take] whatever pieces of Shane remained ... inside me." With less focus and detail, he also chronicles his estrangement from family and former friends while venturing into brief encounters with the drug-dealing underworld of Shane's troubled past. As a student journalist, Jenna's role enlarges in the story's investigative second half.

The novel connects personal identity with cultural and national concerns. In an environment filled with the casual use of homophobic slurs, Ash is careful to mask behaviors that he believes will mark him as gay. In death, Shane becomes the nation's idealized symbol of the gay community's necessary fight for civil rights, yet Ash wishes to remember the messy reality of who he was as a person. Jenna's inclination to reveal Shane's truth underscores the disproportionate effect of the drug epidemic on gay men and dispels the myth of the perfect victim: "it was hard not to sense him becoming, if only slightly, [the story's] villain as well."

Personal loss becomes entangled in the gay community's historical fight for recognition and equality in the novel *All the Truth I Can Stand*.

ISABELLA ZHOU (November / December 2024)

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