

Our Bodies Electric

Zackary Vernon

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Influenced by Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Zackary Vernon's novel *Our Bodies Electric* is a story of self-discovery set on Pawley's Island, South Carolina, in the early 1990s.

The book begins the summer before sixth grade, when Josh is immature for his age but also sensation-seeking. Left to find his own way through the aftershocks of puberty without the knowledge or language to communicate what's happening to him, he pivots between innocence and experience, all the while facing condemnations of perversion in a community that would rather be polite than have an open discussion, resulting in a scatter-plot of missteps.

The story culminates in the summer after ninth grade when Josh dresses as a cheerleader for the high school powder puff game, solidifying his decision to have sex for the first time. Throughout, his exploits evoke a visceral, hormonal physicality. He faces parental neglect, both benign and otherwise, as well as youth group indoctrination and shaming and a paucity of talk about bodies. This leaves Josh thinking of his own sexual urges as "brain maggots." He, his friends, and the collective population of Pawley's Island are stewed in a culture of repression that never fully resolves.

Especially concerned with the tensions between sexual awakening and sexual inhibition and scatological in its details, the book hyperfocuses on Josh's understanding of his own body, making for challenging, often provocative reading. Whether it's Josh's fascination with wearing women's underwear or the boys' deification of their sex education teacher—one of the only adults who will speak openly to them about sex and bodies—*Our Bodies Electric* is a novel that seeks to expose and oppose the shame and confusion that accompanies a community's silence when it comes to themselves and their desires.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (July / August 2024)

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