

The Skinny

Jonathan Wells

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Jonathan Wells was small as a child—short, but also quite thin. That trait, the way others reacted to it, and its nonconformity with perceived male norms led to a painful chain reaction of events that Wells captures in his excellent coming-of-age memoir *The Skinny*.

The book's inciting incident takes place at a private preparatory school, where a teacher singled out Wells for abuse—first by making him eat large amounts of food, and then by forcing him to the ground and sitting on him. While Wells hid the attack from his parents, his father had his own issues with his son's small size. Wanting the boy to bulk up, he pressured Wells about his appetite at meals and required him to exercise. More troubling, his father questioned his thin son's masculinity, even sending him to lose his virginity with a preselected prostitute and making him keep that secret from his mother.

These dark secrets followed Wells when he left for a new school in Switzerland, where he tried to make the best of his fresh start, but still found bullies among his classmates. His interactions with women presented their own challenges after his first few experiences with professionals. And his relationships with each of his parents, and theirs with one another, changed in dramatic ways while he studied abroad. His father's obsession with his size and sexuality colored all of their interactions, and he felt unable to tell his mother, with whom he had been close, about his struggles, straining their bond.

The Skinny recreates its events and conversations in an authentic way, resulting in a reflective, rounded story. Its material is difficult at times, but is nonetheless gripping in its wonderful articulation of an underrepresented perspective on masculinity.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July / August 2021)

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