

The Summer Between

Robert Raasch

Greenleaf Book Group Press

(328pp)

979-888645220-4

An affecting bildungsroman, The Summer Between is about personal discovery in a period of historical tumult.

In Robert Raasch's novel *The Summer Between*, a college-bound man navigates his gay identity amid the upheavals of the 1970s.

Eighteen-year-old Andy prepares to begin his fine arts degree at New York University. He's only out of the closet to his best friend, Elena. He makes secret trips into Manhattan to acclimate to urban life and to familiarize himself with the city's gay community. During one of these excursions, he meets and falls for Ben, an NYU alumnus who plays a crucial role in Andy's quest for belonging.

The novel's seventies ambiance is energetic. Andy references major political events, including his mother's participation in the march for the Equal Rights Amendment, and contemporary literature, including *Voice* magazine and books with gay characters. He also gestures to the legacy of the Vietnam War, empathizing with those who are haunted by trauma. Popular music plays a prominent role as well, and the narration is peppered with mentions of the singers and bands Andy loves. And as people interact, rock records play in the background: the first meeting between Andy and Ben occurs at a Mick Jagger concert.

Less easygoing is the paradoxical interplay of progressivism and close-mindedness that Andy navigates. Against a backdrop of cultural movements toward equality, Andy declares that he will never come out to his mother despite her liberal attitudes; she is too adamant that he have children someday. And Elena, despite the platonic love and acceptance she shares with Andy, uses derogatory terms for gay men and uses "gay" as an all-encapsulating descriptor. Even Andy, owing to the prejudices imparted to him by his environment, makes narrow-minded judgments, as about the flamboyance of the Gay and Lesbian Pride March, whose participants he dismisses as "freaks."

Nonetheless, Andy is a sympathetic hero, both vulnerable and desperate to be embraced by like-minded people. As he contemplates his way through his sexual awakening, his storytelling takes on an intimate tone, both close and descriptive. His earnest desire for self-knowledge and belonging clashes with the motivations of the deplorable older men who take advantage of him; Andy is left with lasting reservations about sexual experiences with other men. Still, love and tenderness come in time, if of an imperfect sort: Andy tamps parts of himself down to please Ben, and he feels sad and insecure when Ben withholds affection.

With its focus on personal discovery within a tumultuous period of American history, the novel *The Summer Between* follows a gay man's coming-of-age in an energetic, sometimes hostile city.

ISABELLA ZHOU (August 27, 2024)

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