



Bala Boy

David M. McKee

AuthorHouse

Unknown (pp)

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David M. McKee's appealing novel, *Bala Boy*, follows likable Daniel McGrew from his arrival at the small Canadian town of Bala in 1946 through the pivotal summer of 1954 when he experiences his first love at the age of sixteen. The often amusing moments of his young life provide an enjoyable and nostalgic read.

McKee has a true talent for storytelling, imbuing Dan's escapades with an authentic, skillfully rendered narrative voice. Some of the bittersweet and humorous moments of adolescence include catching snakes with friends, and tipping over outhouses, alongside apt descriptions of Dan's youthful attitudes about girls and school. "The one thing we boys all knew for certain sure about Rome, was that even if they crushed the Etruscans, burnt Carthage and conquered Egypt, in 400 years they never won a Stanley Cup. Sort of like the Chicago Black Hawks." Easily the novel's greatest strength, Daniel's voice is consistently genuine, engaging the reader all the way through his journey from boy to young man.

Colorful, appropriately-named characters abound in *Bala Boy*, including school principal Mr. Wiliwack, who seven-year old Dan describes as being so committed to non-violence that "...if he had to, he would prove it by strapping the bejeezus out of one of the boys. He had an arthritic shoulder and everything, so it was really inspiring...." Later, Dan debates religion with the endlessly patient Reverend Harry Bickerdyke. True to form, Dan asks provocative questions about Original Sin and Mary's virginity and attributes his impetuosity to what he refers to as his uncontrollable "Evil Cortex," or "E.C." The good-natured bickering between the Reverend and Dan ultimately teaches them both new ways of thinking and leads Dan to a more comfortable view of religion and his place in the world.

McKee calls Dan a fictionalized version of himself as a boy. His love for Bala, the people who inhabit it, and the experience of growing up in a special time and place is deftly illustrated through dialogue and description: "...it was all vivid, all real, and we grew up taking it all for granted."

Though unfortunately hampered by distracting typos and misused words, such as the repetitive use of "passed" in place of "past," for instance, McKee's flair for characterization and storytelling shines through. The novel's episodic structure needs tightening, and the chronology breaks down somewhat at midpoint but eventually picks up a proper pace in the last third of the novel. The ending is poignant without sentimentality, and readers will likely be invested enough in Dan's future to wonder what happened beyond the last page.

Ultimately, *Bala Boy* is a funny, charming and nostalgic coming-of-age novel, populated by memorable characters and their interesting adventures. A tighter focus and more vigilant proofreading would allow readers to engage fully. *Bala Boy*, as characterized by the delightful Daniel McGrew, is certainly worth the effort.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (February 7, 2011)

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