

Bleeder: A Memoir

Shelby Smoak

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Chances are, even the most enthusiastic readers of memoir are not on the hunt for a coming-of-age account of a college boy coping with the dual trials of hemophilia and an HIV-positive status in the 1990s. Such a book could be passed over with the thought that it may be heartbreaking or just plain difficult, which would be a shame. Although *Bleeder* is those things in some measure in some places, it is also insistent and earnest in a good way; an engaging story illustrating an awful reality.

Bleeder is compelling, well written, and nuanced. Here is a recognizable narrator worth spending time with through all the things that separate us from his reality. A true fellow traveler working, and sometimes failing, but always remaining hopeful to meet what life has in store. Shelby Smoak is a poet at heart and in practice, and he uses his considerable literary skills to pull a reader in tight. Once there, we root for him, rail against the odds and the limits of medicine, and share in the hope that permeates every page.

Smoak was diagnosed with hemophilia as a small child, and though he contracted HIV sometime in his preteen years, before the AIDS crisis changed the way blood products are screened, he didn't learn of his HIV-positive status until his eighteenth birthday, in 1990. Determined to experience life on somewhat normal terms, he attends college, holds summer jobs, dates, graduates, and begins working—but all the while lurching from small success to large obstacle, the debilitating complications of his twin illnesses constantly asserting themselves, demanding his attention, time, and full breadth of resources: physical, mental, financial, logistical, and emotional.

On a purely voyeuristic level, Smoak's story serves to acquaint outsiders with the limiting medical and physical complications of hemophilia. Who knew there was so much more to guard against than accidentally stabbing oneself with a kitchen knife? That most of the "bleeding" a hemophiliac fears is spontaneous and often hidden bleeds that occur under the skin and cause crippling joint and muscle pain?

But Smoak is careful to move beyond curiosity. While it may be an abstract given that even in a life bound by severe invisible realities, the normal rites of passage—dating girls, seeking love, exploring sex, yearning for romance—will find a way in. Here we're seeing it up close, and we metaphorically bleed for him.

Smoak's storytelling is rooted in the real—resolute in focusing light on what others may be tempted to look away from. His prose in places, however, is exquisite, and the language poetic, particularly when he describes both the natural world and the one within his head and heart.

LISA ROMEO (Spring 2013)

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