

Darts and Flowers

Dean Backus

Torchflame Books (Aug 26, 2022)

(332pp)

978-1-61153-466-5

Funny and LGBTQ+ affirming, Darts and Flowers is a story about teenagers who are desperate to be loved, validated, and part of a community.

In Dean Backus's queer, comedic romantic novel *Darts and Flowers*, friends reunite, and collide, in humorous, heartwarming ways.

Zack and Josh feel like outcasts at their private high school. Zack's parents are divorced, and Josh is gay. Zack pines for Missy, the quiet, beautiful girlfriend of Brian, an introvert turned jock. Brian, in turn, fumbles through life without knowing what he wants; his sister, Jamie, is a master manipulator who nonetheless looks out for her brother. Rounding out the cast, Jamie's friend Chantel is a gossip queen and a willing accomplice to Jamie's machinations.

To kick off this comedy of errors, Zack and Josh reunite and make a pact to try to break up Missy and Brian so that Zack can seduce Missy and Josh can confess his feelings for Brian. In typical teenage fashion, whether their respective objects of desire will reciprocate their feelings does not occur to Zack and Josh. Their plans grow even more outlandish as they seed gossip throughout the school. When Jamie catches wind of their plans, she ups the ante by proposing to throw a party when her and Brian's parents are out of town, and to spike a variety of drinks to put the would-be seducers in triumphant positions. A variety of double-crossers enter the game, and hilarity ensues. Josh has a belated realization about the moral perils of drugging people without their consent and decides to intervene.

In the lead-up to and fallout from the party, the cast deals with hope and disappointment, yearning and reality. Each person is rendered distinctive, covered in terms of their desires, methods, and goals. Further, each character grows in the course of the narrative, making this a coming-of-age story as well as a chronicle of the bad ideas developed by teenagers whose grasps of morality are still developing.

Written in fresh, snappy prose, the book includes multiple twists and turns as the teenagers' pranks and romps take on lives on their own. Its perspective also shifts between characters often. Given the ensemble cast, this is a sensible means of providing glimpses into the teenagers' myriad, shifting motivations. The pacing is quick, ramping up to the catastrophic night of the party and lingering on its consequences. The book is careful to show how each person deals with the impact on their nascent lives.

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JEANA JORGENSEN (September 12, 2022)

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