

Eli Harpo's Adventure to the Afterlife

Eric Schlich

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A boy who died and saw heaven as a child grapples with his perceptions of the experience, Christianity, and his newfound sexual orientation in Eric Schlich's humorous, introspective novel *Eli Harpo's Adventure to the Afterlife*.

Eli heads to Bible World, an infamous theme park, twice—once as a teenager, once as an adult. The plot hinges on his initial visit, which is preceded by his mother's death from cancer. At the park, Eli decides that he does not believe in heaven after all. The visit ends because Eli kisses Jesus as a way of coming out to himself, even if it takes him almost another decade to come out to his family.

The novel is keen and insightful in addressing the strictures of being a "Heaven Kid." For Eli, Christianity is toxic; he grows up gay and ashamed. His teenage years are marked by religious highs and lows but also by confusion; his sexual orientation is forced into an afterthought position. It takes time, and a tragedy, for Eli to come to terms with himself—and with the fact that his father and older brother, who are steadfast in their beliefs, are unlikely to change their positions on his queerness.

As the novel progresses, Eli matures, coming into his queer identity. Still, even as an adult, he holds stagnated views that lead to discomfiting moments. There are mentions of Eli's fatness when he's a teenager and of his bad relationship with his weight; Eli still comments on his body and the bodies of others as an adult. For him, losing weight is equated with shedding other realities too, including his constrictive religion and his impulse to conceal being queer.

In the novel *Eli Harpo's Adventure to the Afterlife*, a teenager has to figure out his differences alone while growing up in a zealous household.

RACHEL TELLJOHN (January / February 2024)

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