

He's Kinda Tall

Eldot

Diphra Enterprises

(582pp)

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He's Kinda Tall is an idealized novel about high school diversity in the 1960s.

A boy's sunny demeanor and artistic ability lead to him being tapped for a special project in Eldot's novel *He's Kinda Tall*.

Julian's high school teachers take notice of his friendliness and bright personality. He's beckoned to speak to his high school's guidance counselor, who calls upon him to help integrate his school as an escort for Kasey, a Black sophomore who's expected to start in the spring. Meanwhile, Kasey's prominent scientist father brings his family along when he meets with colleagues in North Carolina in anticipation of their move.

When Kasey and Julian meet, school officials and parents are sure they've made the right choice in connecting the boys. Julian wants to help make the new boy feel comfortable, and Kasey is surprised that the bubbly sophomore is speaking directly to him. A fast friendship forms; the boys spend hours talking, playing the piano, and sketching for one another. But beyond their friendship and the school's impending integration, which takes center stage in the first third of the book and its last chapter, the novel is stuffed with other story lines, too; new relationships are formed, and a boy scout troop takes a camping trip.

Throughout most of the book, glancing mentions to the boys' friendship and the school's integration arise in relation to the Kasey's family finding housing, moves to inform teachers of the new student, and Kasey's discomfort over a boy scout service project, but the actual implications of the North Carolina high school's integration are smoothed over, as are race relations in general. Objections to the integration are absent, as is conflict with the scouts and their parents over the boys befriending a Black family.

Of the novel's many characters, all have their moments on stage. Julian, the book's supposed star, is a background presence in chapters whose focus is on other members of his boy scout troop, his mother, his aunt, and his friends' parents. The omniscient narrator examines Julian's interactions with Kasey from others' perspectives, but also facilitates superfluous digressions that distract from Julian's assignment as Kasey's buddy, rendering Kasey a supporting character in a book that initially seemed to be much about him, too.

The novel is more intentional about highlighting the secrecy of relationships between men in the 1960s and is explicit in its depictions of sex acts. Many of the boys in Julian's boy scout troop are gay or bisexual, and several are, or were, in relationships with each other. To parents and others in public, they appear as friends, but in private and around other scouts, they slip into boyfriend behavior. Their relationships, like their late night and midafternoon trysts, are mentioned with frankness in their internal thoughts and are alluded to in dialogue. These aspects of the novel end up being far more interesting than the book's more flimsy integration plot.

He's Kinda Tall is a historical novel in which boys form strong friendships and learn to understand one another.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (August 10, 2020)

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