

I Must Survive!

Harry Simpson

AuthorHouse (Sep 15, 2011)

Softcover \$14.03 (216pp)

978-1-4670-2705-2

This engaging story, with two skillfully spun parallel tales, begs to be read in one sitting.

In his absorbing debut novel, Harry Simpson pairs the urgency of a soldier's 1966 tour of duty in Vietnam with a nostalgic look at a childhood spent in the American Midwest. The combination may seem unlikely at first glance, but in *I Must Survive!*, Simpson skillfully spins parallel tales that illuminate the many, varied stages in one boy's journey to manhood.

Brad Howard first appears in the story as a young man on a perilous patrol boat operation in the middle of the Vietnam War. The mission goes terribly wrong, and Brad is left alone in the jungle, trying to outmaneuver the Vietcong and make his way back to base. At first, it seems like a lot of other lone hero war stories—a straightforward tale of survival against the odds—but Brad has a unique coping mechanism. While holed up in damp caves, waiting for danger to pass, he gets absorbed in memories of his childhood.

These memories go back to 1947, when a six-year-old Brad was afraid of the school bus and in awe of his mother, but plenty mischievous when neither was in sight. Although Simpson's descriptions of Brad's Vietnam experience are detailed and engaging—it's impossible not to tense up when Brad stays motionless even as spiders crawl over his mud-covered body—the childhood scenes are the true star of the show. Simpson captures the innocence of the young boy's voice as he discovers a barn cat's kittens, survives polio and a schoolyard bully, and always comes back to the warmth of his family.

Simpson conveys Brad's perspective, along with a clear sense of the times, through Brad's thoughts. For instance, Brad relates that his grandmother puts WWII-rationed butter on his sandwich; a luxury, even though he doesn't like it. He doesn't like the government-issued margarine his family usually uses either, though he enjoys mixing the accompanying packet of dye into it to make it look like butter. In just a few lines, Simpson efficiently captures domestic life in America in the 1950s through the egocentric eyes of a child. The dialogue among the siblings is similarly expressive, as they sling barbs and share affection in turn.

The book alternates between the adult Brad and his memories, which can be a little jarring at first, as the past is bathed in a nostalgic glow while Brad's present could hardly look more bleak. Soon, though, the parallels become clear—young Brad learns to stand up to bullies as grown Brad learns to hunt his own food—and the movement between eras becomes natural. Rather than slowing the pace of either story, the alternation heightens the tension of both, making for a page-turning read.

Readers who approach Simpson's book for the first time will see a cover that inadequately conveys the nuanced tale held within. The ambiguous cover images convey neither the charm of the childhood narrative nor the urgency of the war story. Those who look further into *I Must Survive*, however, will be rewarded with an engaging novel that begs to be read in one sitting.

SHEILA M. TRASK (May 8, 2014)

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