

Incident at Zhenbao

Emory Black

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"I dreamed of so much better. The old man hated me for it. No balls. Me or him." From the start, first-time author Emory Black grabs the reader through staccato language, immediately establishing the narrator, Tom Hamilton, as an all-action, focused individual in a tough situation.

Kicked out by his stepfather, Tom enrolls in an all-male college to avoid the Vietnam War and immediately finds himself attracted to his dormitory master, a Marine named Mike Kelly. Although neither talks about being gay as they get to know each other, the two circle each other as Tom attempts to quell his inner demons and make peace with his conflicts over having sex with men. After he and Mike share their true feelings and work toward creating a life together, Tom is tested in a plot twist that gives the book its title. The "incident at Zhenbao" becomes a pivot upon which the novel turns, breathlessly bringing the reader along on an unpredictable path.

In recounting Tom's long trajectory toward seeing himself more fully, Black includes plenty of sexual adventure in the tale. Even when Tom feels conflicted about physical encounters with men, the scenes are deeply sensual, as well as frequent. Tom may not always be having a great time, but the reader certainly will. Scenes run the gamut from hardcore to romantic, and Black proves expert in setting just the right tone to keep the book lively sexually without going over the top.

Additional strength comes from the expertly crafted dialogue, which keeps the action rolling at the same fast pace established on the first page. Black rarely pauses to describe landscapes or interiors, saving most of his potent descriptive power for appreciation of the male form. He prefers to focus on long passages of dialogue that are strikingly realistic and compelling. Each conversation, even if it is about minor events, advances the plot like a rock from a slingshot.

Although Tom's adventures will strike a chord with anyone who has come out as gay, Black's narrative draws on universal themes that are likely to resonate with many kinds of readers: Those in military life who are conflicted over their actions versus their duty, those who search for true love but also fear rejection when they find it, and those who try to stand up to authority figures and find personal transformation as a result. Fast-paced and steamy, with a fantastic plot twist as well, *Incident at Zhenbao* is definitely a journey worth taking.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (October 25, 2012)

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