



Love Slaves of Helen Hadley Hall

James Magruder

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This whirlwind of a novel sweeps through the intertwined lives of its many main characters with witty observations and scenes of bawdy depravity.

It's 1983, and the Yale graduate students in James Magruder's *Love Slaves of Helen Hadley Hall* are entering a school year like no other. In the dorm rooms of Helen Hadley Hall, academia takes a backseat to passionate love affairs, social betrayals, psychotherapy, and booze. This whirlwind of a novel sweeps through the intertwined lives of its many main characters with witty observations and scenes of bawdy depravity.

Through the careful eyes of Helen Hadley, the Sapphic spirit who haunts the dorm that bears her name, the novel observes a handful of graduate students whose stories cross and diverge from one page to another, but who are held together under the constant thrum of sexual excitement. The characters are straight, gay, rural American, foreign exchange students, middle-aged, young, professors, students, and townies. These intertwining plots carry us through the school year to a triumphant and dramatic wedding.

Magruder's wit and humor shines through this satire of academic life. There is a large cast—in his author's note, Magruder counts nineteen main characters—and all of these characters are unique, clever, and engaging, though the sheer number means that the quieter ones can get drowned out and forgotten. Despite the number of individual plotlines, almost all are drawn into satisfying and complete resolutions.

This story is told under the growing shadow of the HIV/AIDS crisis that captured the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities at the end of the twentieth century. Many, if not most, of the characters are gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and Magruder carefully depicts how this "gay cancer" featured in each of their lives. Such observations are clear and unsentimental, with a gallows humor that is raw and honest.

Love Slaves of Helen Hadley Hall tackles a list of topics as long as its cast. Quick humor and obscure references draw interest into the sordid lives of graduate students whose only common ground is their shared dormitory, where their accomplishments, transgressions, first kisses, one-night stands, and declarations of love are all observed by the bemused specter of Helen Hadley.

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