

Nirvana Is Here

Aaron Hamburger

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Ari Silverman's violent encounter with a neighborhood boy leaves him questioning himself in Aaron Hamburger's *Nirvana Is Here*, a coming-of-age novel set outside Detroit amid the rise of grunge. It is a nostalgic, wrenching depiction of a youth in crisis whose sensitive, unsparing movements spark with realism.

The novel begins in Ari's present. An openly gay professor, he's about to meet a high school classmate, Justin, whom he hasn't seen in years. The prospect sets off bittersweet memories of the early 1990s, when a teenaged Ari—white, Jewish, suburban, and recovering from the attack—met Justin, a black scholarship student from Detroit. But his friendship with Justin grew complicated when the boys realized their expectations differed. The place where they left off becomes an anticipatory space that Ari imbues with significance.

Flashes of the past intersperse with Ari's adulthood, allowing the events that shaped him to fully manifest their effects over time. Amid pieced-together revelations, snapshots of prep school life, his parents' attempts to get Ari to move forward, therapy, doubts, and sexual exploration, there's a poignant depiction of a boy struggling to reenter life after withdrawing in fear. Music and art are Ari's rich safety net, and they give him a sense of an identity.

This gritty portrayal of adolescence and its cruel secrets highlights the damage that people inflict on each other, yet it's its tender mercies that stand out: friends, a trip to France, a well-timed word. Despite complications, which range from the threat of his assailant's reappearance to anxiety about being outed before he's ready to claim being gay, Ari finds his own voice.

A tender self-reckoning, *Nirvana Is Here* brings the past full circle. Hamburger deftly reveals how incidents recede—even if they leave their mark—to bring new hopes into focus.

KAREN RIGBY (May/June 2019)

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