

Outside In

Doug Cooper

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After one of his students dies, a teacher loses himself in sex, drugs, and rock and roll in this insightful coming-of-age story.

Doug Cooper's debut novel gets off to a stunning and unsettling start before becoming a more familiar, though still insightful, coming-of-age story. Although the story arc is fairly commonplace—experimentation leads to excess, and the reckoning that surely follows—what makes *Outside In* unusual is that its main character isn't a teenager. He's not even a college student. Instead, Cooper gives Brad Shepherd a responsible adult's problems and chronicles his honest, if flawed, attempts to solve them.

When a student overdoses in twenty-eight-year-old Shep's math class, he's suddenly catapulted from his planned path onto the mine-ridden roads of self-discovery. *Outside In* takes us from the trauma-filled hallways of a St. Louis high school to the carefree shores of Ohio's island paradise, Put-in-Bay, where Shep seeks psychological asylum from the horror that his regular, responsible life has become. At first, he finds sweet relief in the bar-hopping, couch-surfing culture of the island, but too much sex, drugs, and rock and roll will take their toll, and it's this downward spiral that Cooper focuses on.

Cooper sets the scene expertly and humorously, capturing the island residents' conflicted view on tourists, for instance: "the quicker the visitors spend their money, the quicker they go home." Conversations flow naturally, from the spot-on "Mr. Shepherd, can I work alone?" pleas from Shep's high school students to the island bartender's shorthand offer: "Hair of the dog?" These casual conversations, of course, only scratch the surface of what Cooper's really getting at: the kids feel trapped in the classroom, and hangovers are a way of life on Put-in-Bay.

The hard-drinking, partying life consumes Shep for the bulk of the book. Seemingly every line of cocaine snorted and magic mushroom decocted is detailed, creating a blur of highs that may well reflect Shep's state of mind, but doesn't always serve to move the story along. Similarly, Shep's drug-dealing roommates blend together somewhat as characters, as do his various love interests. Most of the sex, save for one erotic scene of homosexual experimentation, is hidden from view; although Shep is interested in one girl in particular, she isn't differentiated all that much from the other women in Shep's life.

Shep's inner life gets closer attention than his relationships. Using first-person narration to its fullest, here is where Cooper really captures Shep's journey. For instance, when he learns to play guitar from the island's resident guru, Shep reflects on lessons about working through the hard parts, not just musically but also in his life. Shep's observations are often quirky but perfectly descriptive, as when he sees a drug dealer as "a person who was trapped inside a costume, and the people around him were indentured puppets." Reflections like these—echoed in the shoreline reflection on the book's cover—let us share Shep's transformation.

Shep's summer in paradise comes to a rather abrupt ending, as he discovers that the promise of easy ecstasy is a false one. It's not all neat and tidy, though, and Shep's ultimate decision about his career path is both surprising and

deeply satisfying.

SHEILA M. TRASK (July 31, 2014)

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