

Simon's Mansion

William Poe

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Expressive descriptions and heart-wrenching exchanges make Simon's Mansion a raw LGBTQ+ novel.

Past mistakes haunt a recovering drug addict in William Poe's intense novel *Simon's Mansion*.

After surviving a religious cult and cocaine addiction, all Simon wants to do is move back to the small town where he grew up and become an artist. He and his boyfriend Thad are in love, but Thad proves unhappy in Simon's South. When Thad disappears, Simon fears that his unsavory past has come back to haunt him. He battles the twin temptations posed by cocaine and a beautiful ballet dancer and confronts old demons to rescue Thad.

The story begins in Simon's childhood, exploring the traumas he suffered and laying the groundwork for the poor but understandable choices he makes as an adult. The bulk of it occurs after Simon's return to his childhood home, where interpersonal interactions crackle with tension and subtext. His mother, Vivian, loves and supports him, but she cannot watch him kiss his boyfriend. The novel becomes an intricate portrait of a man who wants to connect with his family but who cannot penetrate the walls that they've built.

The narrative is rich with details that bring people and their histories, as well as the Arkansas setting, to life. Multilayered relationships lead to deeper characterizations, too; even Simon's dog, Cicero, is unique and personable within the story. The mansion, a family heirloom of sorts, is a haunting place whose familiarity comforts Simon even as it burdens him with its expectations and lonely spaces.

Simon's battles with self-doubt add stress to an already fraught narrative. Though an atheist, he continues to feel guilt related to his earlier experiences as a Christian and a cult member. Family members pressure him to conform to their religious beliefs. Thoughtful conversations arise as Simon wrestles with belief—both his and that of others.

Thad suffers while he's missing, but little space is devoted to his recovery or to his explorations of his feelings on the matter. Overlong sentences and overwrought dialogue are a further complication, while dark themes, including pedophilia and rape, are present throughout.

The story's conclusion parallels Simon's story as a whole, filled with both despair and liberation, and with uncertainty lurking at its fringes. Expressive descriptions and heart-wrenching exchanges make *Simon's Mansion* a raw LGBTQ+ novel in which a man struggles to build a new life in the face of loss.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (October 28, 2019)

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