

Snuck Past Death and Sleep

Benjamin Norman Pierce

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Snuck Past Death and Sleep is a descriptive and provocative historical novel about homophobia on college campuses.

Benjamin Norman Pierce's novel *Snuck Past Death and Sleep* concentrates on a tense period on a college campus in the late 1980s, where strangers are brought together to debate homosexuality and Christian doctrine.

At a small, conservative Midwestern college, two gay students, Paul and Edward, feel alone. At first, their identities seem to be all that they have in common. Brought together by Paul's request for a gay dorm mate, the young men are drawn into a campus-wide "debate" about the validity of their "lifestyle."

Although the novel is set in the late 1980s during the Cold War, its events could be present-day. The characters' hairstyles, language, and fashion are modern; the Russian threat is a contemporary issue, too. Characters like nontraditional students Lynn and Craig and painstakingly drawn neighbors and campus staff begin as strangers, but come together through a philosophy club debate event. Across eight weeks, the novel raises the stakes for each character in a gradual way.

The novel is packed with everyday details and conveys the minutiae of each character's inner and outer lives. No thought or impression is excluded, giving the novel a dreamy, lazy pace. With such exhaustive cataloging, the plot is buried in close, third-person narratives. Chapters alternate between perspectives, resulting in a full picture of the Midwestern setting and time period. In such a mundane landscape, small insights and poetic asides glitter: "Hope, not freedom from doubt welled up in Lynn like a warm breakfast, but lighter, without labor beforehand." Charming portmanteau words add a sense of whimsy: dreamlets, windowgrime, and worldlet are among them.

But the novel founders when it fails to address its own premise. Although its characters are vibrant, the novel's atmosphere of conservative homophobia is not interrogated. The logical steps that Edward and Paul take between conceiving and executing the club event are not well supported.

Although the novel's reveal is exciting and exposes a long-running college scandal, its premise is frustrating and unconvincing. It avoids ugly stereotypes about gay men and sexuality, but falls into other, also harmful tropes. Though "of its time," it evades exploring the causes and conditions of anti-gay bigotry and devolves into a web of character sketches. Its lyrical writing is not enough to support its bigger issues.

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