Literary

Sugarless
James Magruder
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“I’m in the wrong life. Do you know what I mean?” Carla confesses to her stepbrother in a rare moment of honesty. Rick understands perfectly, because this is his own situation.

Ignored by his father. Ridiculed by his step-father. Emotionally abandoned by his mother. Rick Lahrem, a fourteen-year-old high school sophomore, escapes loneliness by listening to recordings of Broadway shows. When he joins the school speech team, he becomes a star and finally receives the recognition he craves. His dramatic interpretation of a dialogue from *The Boys in the Band* touches his innermost self and becomes his vehicle of self-discovery. However, his new confidence becomes the seed of disaster. Just when he is about to sweep the state speech tournament, his secret life is exposed, and the two people he most cares about suffer. In the end, Rick does not triumph. He merely goes on.

Rick’s story is like that of any teenager, searching for belonging and acceptance. But this story is also about the various guises of exploitation. Miss Schuette coaches her team on the intricacies of milking the moment to influence the judges and audience. The fundamentalist Christian community in the suburbs of 1970s’ Chicago exploits others’ unhappiness to expand its flock and influence. Rick’s mother Marie, unhappy in her second marriage, and his stepsister Carla, another victim of divorce, are drawn to religion for the same reasons Rick is drawn to Ned Bolang, a speech coach at another school. They all seek physical and emotional comfort. All the lives entwined in this story are indeed sugarless, without sweetness.

Sugarless is not so much a coming-of-age novel as a coming-out novel for adult or very mature adolescent readers. It is not for those easily upset by graphic language. To help him distinguish the voices in his prepared dialogue, Rick picks two focus points on the wall, one for each voice, before he begins his interpretation. Similarly, the novelist seems to have two focus points—at times the voice slips abruptly from an adult looking back on events to the boy throwing insults and wallowing in adolescent vernacular.

James Magruder teaches at Yale School of Drama and at Swarthmore College. He has published short fiction and is well respected for his work in the theater. This passion for theater surfaces in *Sugarless*, his first novel. (October) *Geraldine A. Richards*