Clarion Review

General

Surviving Chadwick
Phillip Wilhite
iUniverse
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Four Stars (out of Five)

White flight; the Black Panthers; the golden age of NBA basketball; Oakland's Free Huey rallies; integration: all of these giants come together in Phillip Wilhite's debut novel. Set in a boarding school—a playground for America's whitest, most privileged youth—Surviving Chadwick explores the basic inequalities in our society through the eyes of Isaiah Isaacson, a young black man from Oakland. Though the majority of the novel is told in flashback, Wilhite's novel feels fresh and contemporary—as though proving how little the system has changed, and how hard it is for the underdog to get ahead.

In 1989, Isaiah Isaacson receives an invitation to his fifteen-year high school graduation. Simply holding the newsletter opens a floodgate of memories, both good and bad. "When I was younger, Chadwick had meant a good education, privilege, upward mobility, and rich white folks, values I wasn't prepared to embrace back then," Isaiah explains. "A visit to Chadwick and a reunion with my lost love just might provide me with the inspiration I needed for moving forward."

Although he has found professional success, Isaiah's marriage is collapsing, and he is eager to reconnect with Jenaye, the young woman he fell for almost twenty years ago. Aided by a collection of old pictures and letters, Isaiah plumbs his memory for traces of who he was at Chadwick, and why he didn't fit in there.

The strength of Surviving Chadwick is its juxtapositions. Told from an outsider's perspective, the manicured lawns and polo ponies leap out in lurid detail. One of Isaiah's teachers drives a yellow Lamborghini. Other students' parents are wealthy beyond measure, like Isaiah's roommate's father, who "was a jerk and had refused to donate money for Chadwick's new swimming pool unless the school named it after him." In comparison, Isaiah's African-American blue-collar parents push him to succeed at Chadwick as a means of fulfilling his

potential—integration is their son's ticket out of the inner city. But Isaiah seems happy being an outsider. He resists being sucked into Chadwick's white culture, hanging Black Power posters in his room and refusing to change his style to fit in. He's hyperaware of the inequalities in his environment, chafing at the "traditional" courses and rituals that his classmates deal with effortlessly. If anything, the novel's weakness is its tendency to be overly reflective. Isaiah's discomfort is immediately apparent in his circumstances, but Wilhite tends to overexplain why something isn't fair, or how discrimination works. When Wilhite lets the plot take the lead, Surviving Chadwick is a great read.

A heartfelt story of first love and a young man's fight for identity, Surviving Chadwick is a portrait of a special time. Isaiah breaks barriers of all kinds, and the reader roots for him at every turn.

Claire Rudy Foster