

The Last Sewer Ball

Steven Schindler

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Nostalgic, touching sequel explores the bonds of friendship and memory at midlife.

In *The Last Sewer Ball*, a divorced, unemployed, and estranged-from-his-son Vinny Schmidt returns to the Bronx of his youth in search of the best friend who disappeared from his life just before high school. In this sequel to *Sewer Balls*, author Steven Schindler focuses on the impact that friendships have on us from childhood throughout our lives, exploring the bonds with the emotion and soul searching of a man at a turning point in his life.

The Last Sewer Ball is told in alternating chapters that bounce between the sixties Bronx of Vinny's teenage years and the Bronx he has returned to now, following the collapse of his life in Los Angeles. He hopes to reconnect with his best friend from childhood, but finds that Whitey's disappearance is amid rumors of murder, desertion, and impending death. In the throes of surveying the pieces of his own broken life, Vinny must decide whether he has the fortitude to track Whitey down, or if the comfort and familiarity of the barstool will be his new best friend.

Life is cyclical, and in the movement between the coming-of-age Vinny and the midlife crisis Vinny, we see parallels of the importance of friendships. "When you once again meet one of the special people who were there for that first black eye, the stickball three-sewer shot, the look through the telescope at a naked lady, the secret subway ride downtown, and on and on and on, no matter how much hair and how many teeth have disappeared, and wrinkles, limps, and lumps have appeared, it's like nothing happened between those magical times of growing up together then ... and now." More so than parents, teachers, and parish priests, the people who most impact who you become are your friends.

Schindler's writing is at its best when Vinny is with his friends, especially in the chapters set in the past. There is a comfort and flow that pull the reader into the world of the Bronx in the sixties. Less successful are the discussions of Vinny's current life, specifically the relationships with his ex-wife and son, which seem important only because we're told they are. Those relationships and a couple of situations that are resolved much too easily stand in contrast to the deep portrayal of Vinny's connections with the people from his past, whether explored then or now.

That aside, this is a novel that will be warmly nostalgic for NYC natives, but also touching to anyone who had that special group of friends who faced the craziness of growing up together.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (May 17, 2013)

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