

## The Rites of Passage

**Jonathan A. Taylor**

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Jonathan A. Taylor's *The Rites of Passage* is marketed as the first in a series of novels; it also ably stands on its own. The story follows Jamie Goldberg from elementary school to college, as he grows from an abused boy into a self-possessed young man. His life is a symphony of pain, humor, filth, and beauty as he struggles to come to terms with his identity in homophobic America.

Jamie's mother is preoccupied with her political work; his father is more interested in sports than in him. They leave Jamie on his own. Unsure of what his same-sex desires mean, Jamie alternates between obscuring them behind his love for Wagner and attempting to "cure" himself through ritualized sexual abuse. In college, he discovers strange new worlds, alien to his working-class Jewish life back home. The future suddenly has potential.

For all the violence in the novel, the story also includes moments of joy and hope, as well as sharp one-liners. Such moments gracefully bring Jamie's story out of the homophobic trope of LGBTQ characters who are defined by their Christlike suffering. Instead, Jamie's suffering is contextualized within the very real questions of what it's like to grow up marginalized and the ways in which such oppression becomes internalized.

The novel is unflinching in condemning its overt bigots and well-meaning liberals, whose tolerance is only extended as far as their own comfort will allow. Jamie's mother, a white Jewish woman and a crusader for the civil rights movement, is at once lauded for her politics and taken to task for placing her son in physical and emotional harm. Such complexities, in their willingness to understand the world and its uncomfortable truths, are the hallmark of Taylor's writing.

CONSTANCE AUGUSTA A. ZABER (November/December 2018)

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