ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

What Gods Would Be Theirs?
Colin Shanafelt
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It is the 2005-06 school year at Northlake High School, which serves the posh suburb of Pinot Bay, near Austin, Texas. When Preston Wiley is not out on sprawling Lake Travis on his father's thirty-seven-foot yacht, *The Ion*, or partying with his classmates, he attends Northlake. But this year, the bored and somewhat jaded Preston is experiencing an unprecedented inner alertness. By some twist of fate he is taking two English classes, with two very gifted teachers. American Lit is led by a new teacher, Gavin McBride, a passionate idealist, a poet, and ex-Peace Corps veteran with a social change agenda; McBride is a true believer, not in religion but in books and ideas and the pursuit of truth. He sometimes strums an old Gibson hollow-body guitar when he is not lecturing. Preston's British Lit class is taught by Laird Hardin, a married Air Force vet with a child whose personal philosophy resembles that of a character in a Cormac McCarthy novel, who believes that our random, apathetic universe is "a puppet show where the puppets are controlled by puppets, who themselves are controlled by more puppets …" Hardin claims not to be suited for a life of family ties or the workaday world. He wants another kind of life—of pleasure in the moment. "I was born to feel," he says. Both teachers, however gifted, are on the bubble. McBride is risking his career by putting his message on YouTube. Hardin, meanwhile, has become dangerously friendly with a female student. And Preston is the attentive witness.

The tension between McBride's pursuit of the good and Hardin's amoral cynicism is as integral to Colin Shanafelt's literary novel, his first, as Lake Travis is integral to his setting. Shanafelt plays out opposing metaphysical positions by characterizing and plotting them, and by adding organized religion, "those infected with knowing," as McBride argues, into the fray. The drama is made all the more compelling by Preston's musing on his pivotal year that began when he "already knew everything" and ended with him knowing only a little something about knowing.

Shanafelt taught high school in Austin at about the time his story takes place, and he now teaches English at Austin Community College. *What Gods* is the kind of novel that will do for

readers what it did for its narrator, Preston. It will sharpen their moral sensitivities as it asks them to consider their beliefs.

Joe Taylor