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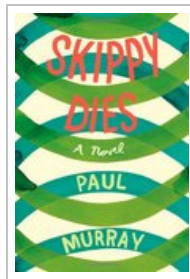
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## Skippy Dies by Paul Murray

Leigh Newman

web exclusive



The fat kid who plays the French horn. The mentally stunted drug dealer. The suck-up, runner-up for valedictorian. The boy who lights his fart into "a magnificent plume of flame...a cold and beautiful enchantment that for an instant bathes the locker room in unearthly light." These are a few typical characters from Paul Murray's *Skippy Dies*, a sprawling homage to adolescence, string theory, roofies, wet knickers, and unrequited love. Set in Ireland at the Seabrook Catholic School for Boys, the book features a cast of fourteen-year-olds who have populated classrooms for centuries.

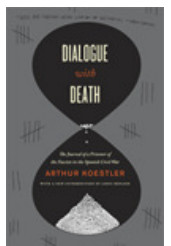
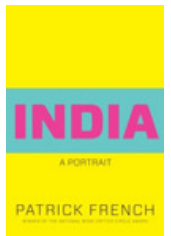
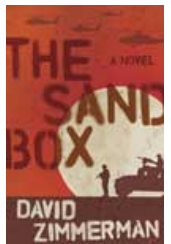
And yet as rendered by Murray's skillful, compassionate prose, each of these characters emerges as an actual boy—sympathetic at times, contemptible at others, funny, terrifying, loving, and real to the reader. The novel begins with the death of Daniel "Skippy" Juster during a doughnut-eating contest, which might have been a murder. The story then circles back in time, following the lives of Skippy and those around him, notably Ruprecht, his brilliant overweight Big-Bang-obsessed roommate, and Howard, his befuddled history teacher, a failed alumnus also known as "Howard the Coward."

Along the way, Skippy falls in love with a Frisbee-playing girl from St. Brigid's; the school holds a Halloween dance during which the punch is spiked with drugs (leading to a massive, bass-pounding gropefest); and Ruprecht discovers a hole the space-time continuum that allegedly transports a toy plastic robot into another universe. Lesser characters weave in and out, such as Carl, who longs for Skippy's love interest while beating up younger students for their Ritalin.

Murray nails the minutia of this world (right down to the sexually explicit screen savers) while also developing a broader overview, particularly of the culture that created these kids—the families that packed them off to a pricey Catholic school, where they can acquire the skills to become leaders of Irish banking and industry. But what makes this book a triumph is Murray's grasp of his characters' imaginations, of their innocence and perversion and yearning (they are always yearning). Here's how Howard—a teacher and yet still a boy, really—describes a new substitute's wardrobe: "delicate cream sweater that exposes clavicle like parts of impossibly graceful musical instrument." Murray then adds (with a touch of adult awareness): "It's as if she's walked into his memory and chosen her outfit from the wardrobe of all the preppy golden-haired princess he yearned for hopelessly across the malls and churches of his youth."

Critically, one could compare Murray to another Irish author such as Patrick McCabe. But

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Murray lacks McCabe's bleak, terrifying violence. In terms of tone and style, he has much more in common with the American writer Jim Shepherd, who excels at describing the dark, confused minds of a teenage boys and men (see: *Generation X*) while weaving larger thematic tropes into their emotional lives (see: *Like You'd Understand Anyway*), always to heartbreaking affect.

In a similar fashion, Murray uses Ruprecht's obsession with string theory as a kind of scientific foil to the competing universes that co-exist in the book. For example, when the boys break into the neighboring girls' school, "they see through the open door ruffled bed covers, balled-up foolscap, posters of footballers and pops stars, homework timetables, bottles of spot cream—uncannily like the dorms in Seabrook except in some unplaceable but totally fundamental way completely different." More painful are other dual realities: the fantasy love life that Howard develops, causing him to leave his real-life girlfriend; and the pill-induced stupor that Skippy falls into in order to avoid facing his mother's illness.

Interestingly enough, the antics of other characters often overshadow Skippy all together, which perhaps is the point of the book—that unremarkable children are overshadowed by the smartest or dumbest or funniest or meanest or ugliest or most handsome, sometimes even overshadowed out of existence. *Skippy Dies* is 600 pages, and the supposedly driving question of the first 400 pages seems to be: Who killed Skippy? But sometimes this question gets lost in a sea of competing digressions involving everything from Irish Druids to World War I. Each digression is well-written and relevant, at once whimsical and meaningful. Nevertheless, the novels sag in second third, losing focus.

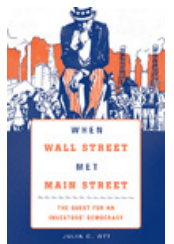
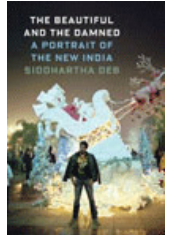
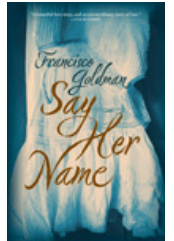
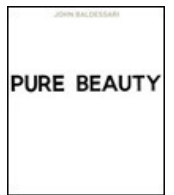
But don't let this lag make you put the book down. The last section of the novel, "Ghostland," is excellent, opening up into a juggernaut of feeling as characters grieve their friend and the grim knowledge that it brings. "It was," says Howard, "as if a panel has been slid back and he's glimpsed the secret machinery of the world."

*Skippy Dies* ends on a satirical note, as Seabrook is wrestled away from the fuddy-duddy old Irish priests and handed over to a private-management company. But Murray's book comes with a serious emotional charge. What will resonate with all readers is a time-tested but still exquisitely rendered realization: that young people's worlds are remain blissfully, beautifully distinct from the adult world, until those two worlds collide.

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*Leigh Newman's work has appeared in One Story, Tin House, The New York Times's Modern Love, and National Public Radio's The Sound of Writing. Her memoir about growing up in Alaska is forthcoming from Dial.*

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