

Drunk frat boy learns a lesson

Reviewed by Katie Haegele
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By Jeremy Iversen

Simon Pulse. 261 pp. \$6.99

“Compulsively readable” - at first glance, it’s just a shopworn expression that book reviewers toss in when they’ve run out of good things to say. But a compulsive experience isn’t necessarily a happy one. You might even say a compulsive read is one you keep at even after it starts to hurt.

All the action of Jeremy Iversen’s debut novel takes place the night of antihero Bret’s 21st birthday, during a huge party at his fraternity during which he must drink 21 “units” of alcohol. Through flashbacks we learn what Bret and his fellow blockheads are up to the rest of the year: harassing the smart kids, getting mad play in the hot tub, and sounding like the surgeon general when they talk about drinking. Iversen does a fine job depicting the absolute worst of college life - not just the bad behavior, but the sense of entitlement that fuels it.

But, like a superfun rush event, the book pulls you in. Iversen’s dudes and bros are painfully realistic, down to their hair gel and pitch-perfect usage of the word *like*. Printed on pulpy paper in a pleasingly small format, the book itself is as inviting as a magazine, and just as current.

Its Southern California setting will woo you, too, the surfers and palm trees putting a sunny spin on the more common East Coast campus tragicomedy. (The author is a recent graduate of Stanford.) At the same time, descriptions of teenagers in Gucci, a desert landscape dotted with chain restaurants, with weather that’s almost too perfect, all capture a scary nihilism. Like a little Hugh Hefner, Bret gets his pick of the hot girls on campus and debauches himself on a daily basis, even though, as we eventually learn, his C-list school is kind of shabby, and his fraternity is broke.

Iversen lays it on too thick sometimes, giving us updated Bret Easton Ellis, a Lost Generation for the 21st century. “So the lights here, and the gold, and the music - they were, at root, cracked, tarnished, and shrieking: a trick,” goes one description of a gala affair that Bret’s mother dragged him to. During a fistfight, Bret snaps and hurts the guy much more than is necessary. “You were going to kill me,” he tells the stunned kid still bleeding in the street, “but I think you’re too late.”

Melodramatic, yeah, but to be fair, some of the things Bret goes through really are matters of life and death. He finds out that the fraternity might get thrown off campus because one of its brothers

drugged and viciously raped a girl, and another out-of-control fight at the party puts a member of a rival frat in the hospital.

The book's most powerful idea is that, underneath his asinine thug-life persona, Bret is miserable, a sensitive fellow who spends his birthday taking painful trips down memory lane. Even through his extreme, death-defying drunkenness, we can see that he's smart, and the forced hilarity of fraternity life makes him feel panicky and trapped. At 21, he's constantly "in motion," as Iversen has it, running from the choices he's made. It seems awfully young for a life crisis, but that's when they're having them these days and, honestly, is that a big surprise? Who wouldn't buckle under the intense, conflicting pressures of negligent but overbearing parents and a dehumanizing culture that turns kids into consumers?

With its moving images of leaders and followers, teams and coaches, this book speaks intimately to the burdens that weigh on young men. It's also likely to be controversial on a few levels - unpopular with parents because of its violence, with fraternities for its unflattering depiction of Greek life, and with book critics for its unsatisfying and, quite frankly, absurd tragic ending that reads like a Radiohead song. But beyond the postmodern posturing, Iversen's book packs more punch than the detachment of *American Psycho* because his protagonist thinks - maybe more than he'd like - about the consequences of what he does. Reading about his exploits actually hurts, and it's supposed to. By the end, even the most books-hittingest, anti-Greek reader will concede that poor Bret has learned his lesson.