

Two Halves of New Haven: A Review

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Martin Schecter's first novel, *Two Halves of New Haven* (Crown, 1992) is actually two books in one: the book is neatly divided along the lines of the author's and his main character's decision to drop out after a year of medical school at Yale. It is, one gathers, primarily an autobiography. Schecter, like the fictitious Paul Levinson, also left medical school to tend bar and to attend art school. The first half represents his struggle with medicine versus life and art, his family versus himself. It is a well known theme, but like many first time writers, Schecter treats it as terra nova, imbuing his prose with the newness of discovery. It's not entirely unconvincing. He winds his growing resolve to leave medical school around the character of Daniel/Lyle, a young man arrested as an impostor, pretending to be a medical student. It's a choice fraught with possibilities, none explored too deeply. What is done well is the capture of the sense of shallowness of the medical school experience: the characters around him, his fellow students, are not the larger than life, permanent friends-more-than-friends that one expects of such a place and time, of such a peak-life experience. They, and the environs, tend to be two-

dimensional, directed, driven, and ultimately, boring to anyone not also in love with the profession of medicine. It's an interesting insight into the making of a physician, and enlightens many of one's disappointments with the doctor-patient relationship.

The first half of the book is interesting, if a little predictable. It keeps the reader interested by jumping from the present into the past, recent and distant, with images of the young Paul at the science fair, moving into medical school, plodding through the first year, a strangely distant death in the family, and the inevitable blowup between himself and his father when he announces his intention to depart from medical school. Paul's excuse: he wants to be an artist—specifically, a video artist. This is oddly appropriate: there is something decidedly camera-like about the prose and dialogue throughout. It does not delve into, or embellish the characters or the action, it records their images, their surfaces, but not their contents. He tries perhaps too hard to impress the reader with medical lingo, but winds up bewildering. There is also a certain lack of distinction in the voices of the characters; they seem to lack individuality, and all seem to ring with the same voice of the author. The form and the content are well matched: nervous

and immature (“...the right mixture of innocence and enthusiasm...” as Schecter states.). The sense of apartness that Paul experiences in medical school is also well done: not only is he separated from his fellow students by his desire not to be a student, but also by his emerging awareness of his own homosexuality.

Paul's coming out is the main thrust of the second half of the book, and this is where the book is much more likely to capture the attention and imagination of the average reader. He moves to an apartment in New Haven, gets a job as a bartender and befriends several of the employees there. He eventually comes out to Marlou, the cook, who happens to be a lesbian. His character now grows rapidly in strength of action and of voice, and the characters around him are much more intriguing and independent. There still remains a cinematic flavor to the story, but this is a major theme: Paul's development as a video artist. What is touching is the naiveté, unrevised by the years of experience intervening between the fact and the writing. Schecter is unabashed about relating the elation of the first touch of and by another man's body, the freshman enthusiasm, the impulsive urges to rip everything out by the roots and start one's life over again: “You

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Brattleboro Food CoopCahoots
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Burlington College
Chassman & Bem
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Pearls
Planned Parenthood

Castleton

STEP Learning Center

Craftsbury

Craftsbury Public Library

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