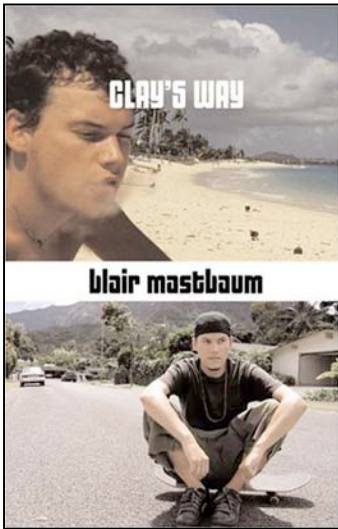

Sam in Samsara

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Clay's Way, Blair Mastbaum

(Alyson Publications, 2004, 246pp, \$12.95)



In his astonishing debut novel (which incidentally and deservedly just won a Lambda Literary Award for best gay debut fiction, 2004), *Clay's Way*, Blair Mastbaum pushes the coming-of-age novel a step further than the usual fare, charting not only the loss of innocence of his conflicted young protagonist, but boldly examining, and perhaps even mocking, the cult of American masculinity itself. From a Buddhist reading, masculinity is the central obscuration in this tale, leading both to a

great deal of unnecessary confusion and suffering as well as to an awakening.

At the novel's outset, fumbling, 15-year-old skaterboy Sam wakes up to write some dubious haiku and piss out the window, setting the punk tone for what proves to be a tale both sweet and world-weary, for Sam is a jaded teenager with a crush that's making him pine with unfulfilled desire. It doesn't help that his skateboarding abilities are lame at best, he's self-conscious about the quality of his haiku, his parents are

clueless, and the object of his affection is one of the coolest and most decidedly not-gay cats on the local surfing scene. Clay, 17, with his ripped Portuguese bronze torso and jet-black crewcut, his pickup truck, his job at the board shop, his hot blonde girlfriend and his superlative taste in teenage cool—music, baggy shorts, tattoos, ratty t-shirts often as not pulled casually off and tossed on the floor; his preferred bud and Hawaiian slang—make him a superman of maleness, and by extension maya—a false god, but one with real power to induce raging hard-ons. And what’s a hardon, but the wick of samsara. The lit wick.

And Sam is burning. Though other than this perfectly normal, albeit difficult, teenage lust, Sam is really a pretty well-adjusted gay kid considering, with no real hang-ups about gender or sexuality. He’s not out, but he’s O.K. with it internally, and he’s not coming from a generation as trapped in such dualities as past generations of queers have been. This is definitely a new generation’s coming of age story, not a coming-out story at all in the traditional sense of the word. It’s a love story, plain and simple, about two boys—and one with a profound message about projection and the minefield that is desire and samsara.

It is heartening to see that 35 years after Stonewall, there is progress—not only in a young person’s self-acceptance, but in his ability to be himself and not adopt a ‘gay personality’ to help him navigate a hostile world, which in the past was arguably more common—some might say even necessary. In Sam’s case, it seems more about a gradual growing into his sexuality, more like how straight kids are able to develop. It feels less abrupt, less rife with fear and shame, but it’s still not easy and this book does not in any way sugarcoat it. There is violence, there is isolation and lack of support, and the climax of the story is a tour de force of the subconscious bubbling up and threatening to tear both boys’ worlds asunder. But there is hope, and a little more room to grow and learn, and most importantly, there is the encouraging message that tragedy is not inevitable for the gay protagonist. In fact, the real loser in this book is the boy who doesn’t have the courage to wake up, and that’s both a fairer and a more constructive message.