



Sea of Tranquillity

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Paul Russell's delicately layered, richly textured novels have won him widespread acclaim as one of the finest contemporary American novelists. *Sea of Tranquillity*, possibly his most ambitious and rewarding novel, traces a disintegrating nuclear family across two tumultuous decades of American life - from the early '60s to the '80s - and is told in a quartet of voices: astronaut Allen Cloud, his wife, their gay son, Jonathan, and his friend/lover. Ranging in time and emotion from the optimism of the first moon shot to the dark landscape of the age of AIDS, *Sea of Tranquillity* is an extraordinary and compelling novel.

Sea of Tranquillity Details

Date : Published August 25th 2003 by St. Martin's Griffin (first published September 1st 1994)

ISBN : 9780312303723

Author : Paul Russell

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Lgbt, Gay, Gay Fiction, Literary Fiction, Fiction, Glbt, Queer, Literature, American

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From Reader Review Sea of Tranquillity for online ebook

Erin Matthiessen says

Lovely

A beautifully written though somewhat uncentered look at the breakdown of an American family - an astronaut, his wife and their gay son - through the turbulence and the disillusionment of the 1970's and 80's. Russell's insights into his characters verge on the poetic, but though it leaves the reader with a feeling something like redemption, in the end it feels a bit unearned. The center does not hold.

Still, all of Russell's books are worth reading, for the vividness of his prose, the emotional transparency of his characters, and the affection of the author for their - and our - brokenness and thwarted attempts at love.

Tex Reader says

4.0 of 5 – Realistic, Telling, Thought-Provoking, Sad & Hopeful.

This was an intriguing story of a splintering nuclear family through the highs and lows of two turbulent decades over the 70s and 80s. It was realistic and telling - depicting the dysfunctional dynamics that pulled them apart. There was sadness - the rejection of gays and the coming of AIDS. And there was hope - showing how familial and romantic bonds held them together.

What I noticed, and enjoyed, right away was Paul Russell's literary quality. His writing was educated, observant and prosaic, and at times emotional where it moved me to tears. I appreciated that it was not romantic, in an m/m romance way, but broadened to be more about living, as well as symbolic. It started out somberly, dealing with divorce, regrets and relationships, and went on through various mood swings and events in the MCs' lives. And in that same way, I loved that the ending was true to life (view spoiler).

I find it interesting to read this particular kind of "historical" of the recent past – in that it wasn't written as HF but as contemporary and current for its time. So in that way, over 20 years later, Russell was able to take me back and make me feel I was there. He captured the people and culture, especially that of the space race and then the early AIDS era. In fact, I liked the Houston locale and the framing around the space race that I grew up with. I've thought that I'm the first generation that could add to saying a policeman or fireman, that "When I grow up I want to be an astronaut." So while some thought less of it, I relished the little bits of info about space flights and didn't feel it was too much, but served to give a sense of it.

Paul Russell told the story from four different povs in alternating chapters (Allen, Joan, Stayton and Jonathan). This worked fairly well, especially the device of using first person except for Allen. It gave a sense of his being more removed and not as connected emotionally – symbolically like an astronaut far away out in space (which might also explain the choice of his being an astronaut). Of minor note, it sometimes took a while to figure out who was talking, which created unnecessary confusion and could have been easily remedied with a name to start each chapter.

What I found most compelling were the gay aspects of the story, which centered around the two boys/young men. I felt they were better developed and likable, in different ways, because they did provide an intriguing contrast. Russell captured and gave me a good sense of what the gay culture was like then, both the good and

bad; and depicted well the thoughts and desires of teens and young men from a male pov.

There were times when the characters flirted with being stereotypes; and while I applaud Russell's diversity, this included a lack of depth on those interracial aspects. But ultimately the story he wove around his MCs made them more three dimensional, so I came to think of them as more symbolic representatives of certain kinds of people in our lives, even in some respects of who I myself am.

Overall, making this an interesting and thought-provoking look into the lives of four people.

John says

This isn't an easy read. There are four characters revealing four points of view about a singular family. I loved it, even when I thought it was becoming a mess, I always came out the otherside appreciating where the novel finally led (and there is much less mess than beauty in this somber tale).

Paul Russell and Dennis Cooper are the two best writers of dark gay fiction. Each probes areas that make me think, shudder, find compassion for those I wouldn't think I could, and even feel thrilling, disturbingly aroused. That's worth the price of admission, isn't it. But then, like goobers and popcorn, Russell, adds a breathtaking turn of phrase; succinct character development, and surprising plot twists. I'm sold.

Steve Woods says

This is an excellent piece of work, full of humor and pathos. It tells the story of two gay boys, one, Jonathon, a flaming star shooting through his own life and the lives of those around him, separate and different to all around him, drawn compulsively in his isolation to sex as the only way he seems to be able to connect. A truth that answers the deep seated frustration put into him by the distance and emotional unresponsiveness of his father, an astronaut and the his mother a lush. The other grown up in fear and loathing created by a fundamentalist Christian preacher, his father and and an emotional idiot his mother. Their relationship flames into a significance that neither truly understands until they are busted and Jonathon is renounced by the other, and it scars him. Their lives go their separate ways. Jonathon, predictably, given the time and his promiscuity is infected with the AIDS virus, there is great pathos here for it must have been the story of the lives of so many young men of that time. The other moves into a stable relationship with a mutual acquaintance but when Jonathon returns the relationship between all three resumes at a greater depth with substantial poignancy. A beautifully written story of great sadness by Paul Russell, I will seek more

Jason Weidemann says

Published in 1994, I first read this novel when I was an undergrad in college, in 1998 or 1999. I was hungry for models and history and culture, and wanted to know how to live and love in this new lifestyle in which I had been inaugurated, a lifestyle that wanted to be a culture... Or had been one at one time? In any event, so fraught and delicate and in danger, yet key to my own flourishing.

I remember being very moved by the book. Many such books moved me then. I'd finish them in my dorm room and stalk the West Bank with my hands in my pockets, feeling overly full-- "being in excess," as one of the characters puts it in the novel.

Over ten years later, I wanted to return to the book. I'm 35 years old and it is 2013. The "era" of "gay fiction" is long over. Who needs our elegiac AIDS narratives now? Would the book still move me? I secretly hoped it would, but I knew as all of us know now that gay culture now is not poetry. It is not a philosophy or ethics. It is a demographic, a new conservatism, a bloc.

I admit that the first 2/3 of the novel felt dated to me. Upon this second read, its allegory was obvious. Deep in Tennessee, two high school boys meet. Jonathan seduces and draws out the shy Stayton, the black sheep of an evangelical family. Stayton rejects Jonathan, but the bell has been wrung. As an adult, Stayton eventually comes out and establishes a well-rounded gay life in D.C. with his African American boyfriend Kai. AIDS emerges, and after many years, Jonathan -- itinerant, wandering, pure energy -- is in Turkey. He falls sick with AIDS and returns to Kai and Stayton in a tempest of love and energy to die with them, on his own terms.

The lessons of this allegory are clear. Jonathan represents the hedonism, experimentation, joy, sexual abandon, multiculturalism, potential, and transformative fervor of pre-AIDS sexual culture. It's a sacrificial role; it must be burnt on the pyre of AIDS in order to usher in the stable, post-racial gay culture that Kai and Stayton represent. Not unhappy, but not in love... barely emotional, their relationship is a psychic refuge from the disease. Jonathan's return, unasked for but welcomes, sets them in motion again. Jonathan must die in this book, he must get AIDS. He is too in love with the world, with his own asshole, with stars. The least educated of the three characters, and yet his wisdom transcends them. His dying is a lesson that will set them all free.

Does gay culture have a particularly well-honed vocabulary to describe loss? To say goodbyes? I have not lost a friend or lover to AIDS but I have lost lovers and friends and so this book still moved me even today when gay men no longer "lose" anything unless they choose to, or so we are told, and the magic of this book is that the characters are allegorical in the same way that we as gay men are allegorical, each of us, on our own journey, carries the culture forward or not. As frangible as it is each of us matters. The gay kid who commits suicide is a philosophy arrested at the first exciting moments of its elaboration. We are constantly teaching each other how to live and love. I see models all around me. Books like this should still be important, perhaps even because of their datedness. "This is what we talked about then."

Kevin says

I have mixed emotions about this book.

It a book that drags the reader kicking and screaming through the lives of several characters. It's good because you really end up liking and caring about the characters. It's bad because you end up caring about the characters and all their flaws.

Some of the characters, at least for sections of their life, come directly out of 'characters' in my life. Sometimes it hits too close to home.

Well written, kept me engaged even when I didn't want to be (the dragging the reader part), and it flowed well.

I even approve of the ending, it was appropriate, and tidy (I hesitate to use the word tidy, but it fits).

Harry Wingfield says

This may be my favorite of Russell's books. He does a great job of bringing life to his characters, and showing the way they affect each other. He deals with coming of age and coming out of the closet in small town mid-America, relationships of parents and their children, creating a new family when your birth family rejects you, and the effects of the AIDS epidemic on all of this.

Tristan Goding says

This book left me feeling haunted, though I was touched by a lot of it. This was a casual read on my part, I will admit. It was a lot more layered than I could have ever expected it to be. I didn't think it would resonate with me so much, or get under my skin as deeply as it did. I don't know if a lot of readers expect this kind of thing from writer Paul Russell. At the time he was unfamiliar to me. If you're new to his books, I probably wouldn't start with *SEA OF TRANQUILITY* unless you're extremely open-minded. This book goes into some pretty scary territory. Once it goes to those places it never really returns. There are a lot of characters, all of them full of problems, and there are times when their actions can start to overwhelm. Depending on who you are, you may feel a lot of sympathy or you may not. I think that this is the kind of book that many people will be able to fully relate to. Because of this, many of the characters will likely leave you feeling pretty icky as they'll remind you of similarly flawed people that you know in your day-to-day life. If you plan on reading this, brace yourself because there are some startling ideas in here.

Christine says

This was very readable but not nearly as intense as *Boys of Life*. I've read *The Salt Point*, too, and neither come close to the power of *Boys of Life*. Maybe it's a personal thing with me, since I identify so closely with the narrator in *Boys*. Anyway, this is good enough in a gay novel kind of way.

What I liked about it is the range of topics covered: a lot of gay novels never get out of the gay ghetto, but this one marries AIDS, gay sex, and male relationships to travels in Turkey, NASA, space exploration, and gender roles in the 70s through the 90s. None of us really live in a gay ghetto - our lives are much richer than that, and I liked that this novel attempted to capture that.

Julian says

Fascinating odyssey of a story! The scope of this novel was fascinating, and the historical context provided that much more significance to the narrative.

Martin says

I think that this is a very ambitious book that didn't quite work out...four narrators, diverse characters, chapters ranging from poetry to domestic drama to space travel. It was very cluttered narrative and did have some compelling moments but this was the most difficult read I have had of all the authors books.

Jeffrey Richards says

I'm torn about how much I liked this novel. For the most part, the story and writing kept me intrigued and interested in continuing but, I feel, the author lost his way a bit during certain parts, and, in turn, lost me as a reader.

Sea of Tranquillity traces a disintegrating nuclear family across two tumultuous decades of American life - from the early '60s to the '80s - and is told in a quartet of voices: astronaut Allen Cloud, his wife, their gay son, Jonathan, and his friend/lover. The novel ranges in time and emotion from the optimism of the first moon shot to the dark landscape of the age of AIDS.

Compelling stuff, to say the least. And Paul Russell definitely captures the essence of the differing historic periods and the world of NASA, the space mission, and all the mechanics that entails. He also does a great job at capturing the early years of the AIDS epidemic, especially by honing in on just the one character struggling with the disease versus trying to incorporate the vastness of entirety of the crisis. Unfortunately, he doesn't quite capture the vastness of his own ideas as portrayed through the lives of these 4 characters (really, just 3 of them - the astronaut, his wife, and the son, as the friend/lover is the most mentally stable of the characters, despite his own familial issues). The enormity of Russell's grasp - the moon, the universe, the actual existence of man - might be too grand for anyone to fit into a novel but he definitely gives it a shot, with some success and some failures.

The characters are well drawn, for the most part, though their voices (each chapter is told from a particular characters perspective and it switches with each chapter) tend to sound a lot alike. There's one chapter toward the end that I'm still not sure who it was and I should have been able to by that point.

Overall, I have a feeling certain aspects of the novel will stay with me, haunt and dog me, which is a sign of a good story and good writing. But certain aspects will continue to frustrate me, as well.

Dale says

Vivid and compelling story of a fractured American family, told in a quartet of voices spanning several decades. Astronaut Allen, his alcoholic ex-wife and their gay son Jonathan kept the story moving along well. The intermingling of the stresses of the burgeoning space program with the perspectives of sexual identity in America in the 70's and 80's was a very intriguing concept.

Jonathan, a promiscuous, carefree spirit was an inspiring character, but I found his friend/lover Stayton particularly fascinating and easier to identify with. However, I couldn't give the book 5 stars because Paul Russell kept the story going on far too long, with seemingly wild tangents which I thought weakened the story's impact. Overall, a very interesting and thought provoking book!

Peggy says

An extremely easy read and would definitely be a relaxing beach type book. Fairly predictable but rather far fetched. That said, overall I did enjoy it.

Quinn says

I've read all of Mr. Russell's books except for : " Boys Of Life". I've really enjoyed each of them ,individually , yet there's something that is incredibly unique about this book. I don't think I want that to mean it is "the best" . I want to make an allusion to a magic carpet ride here . It's the most succinct manner by which I can put this book into some sort of perspective , for myself, at least . I am only 3/4 of the way through the book and I need to take a respite. I have to read it in increments; little gaps or spaces in time, as it enmeshes into my own life's experiences. The story is so beautiful and reminiscent at the same time. The fact that the places (terrestrial) Jonathan travels to are some of the most alluring places I've ever been to as well may also make me bias. I truly believe it's much deeper than that however, it's an intrinsic ride the author is taking me(us) on ,and at times , I find myself holding my breath, and at others, gasping for air. It invokes so many emotions and makes you see the fantastical as possible through the eyes of tormented pulchritude.
