

# Surprising Myself

*Christopher Bram*

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**Surprising Myself** Christopher Bram

A brilliant debut novel about the relationship between a boy and his homosexual friend.

## Surprising Myself Details

Date : Published June 15th 1988 by Holt Paperbacks (first published 1987)

ISBN : 9780805006698

Author : Christopher Bram

Format : Paperback 424 pages

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

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## From Reader Review Surprising Myself for online ebook

### Patrick Ryan says

This book was a major influence on me as a writer and a person.

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### Michael Armijo says

This is a worthy book to read. It awakens us to the weaknesses of human beings. There were a number of meaningful lines in this book. I'd highly recommend it. I had the opportunity to meet Christopher Bram at a recent booksigning in the Village for his new book, CIRCUS ANIMALS. He was a delight and a true gentleman. This was Christopher Bram's first book (Surprising Myself)...and I found THE NOTORIOUS DR AUGUST a more well written novel...however...

There were significant lines that will forever remain in my mind after enjoying this book... Better a letter than a silent, convenient forgetting.

Nobody's life is ruined until they're dead.

It's like Oscar Wilde says. We regret only those things we didn't do.

You must be out of your tree. THERE ARE MORE LINES...but I can't give it all away. Smiles!

We clearly all need to wake up periodically. I realized that I often wildly look around (in my own life) and 'at times' we MUST grab for something to prove that one really does control ones life. Surprise Yourself...by reading this real treat!

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### Christoph Fischer says

"Surprising Myself" by Christopher Bram is the gay love story between Joel and Corey, told from the perspective of Joel. Forcefully transferred by his CIA father to the US he meets and falls for Corey. Both teenagers in the 1970s they learn to accept themselves for who they are and learn how to be in a relationship. Joel's sister is a great character to help reflect on their issues.

The story is written very warmly, at times quite explicit about the physical side of their relationship with much sensitivity and powers of observation. The story to me was in places almost too good to be true, I would have imagined coming out at that time a little harder than it appears to these characters.

The strength of this novel to me lies in the characterisation of the two boys, whose feelings - as conveyed in both dialogue and narrative - draw you in and make you care for them deeply.

I also love the honesty in which the characters talk to each other, with maturity and willingness to resolve conflict. Bram never plays our heart strings by making us feel sorry for the two, making them victims or playing up drama.

I really enjoyed this story and found myself not wanting it to end, given my to-be-read pile of books this is quite a claim.

At the end there is a personalised list of gay books the author recommends and which I will be checking out. This is a wonderful read that must have been rather ground breaking when it first was released in the 1980s, something I wish more people would read about to see how issues of identity through sexual orientation can be dealt with.

Not just for gay readers at all.

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### **Ricardo says**

Sometimes the only way to find out for sure if an author is or isn't for you is to read one of their books. After reading this one, I have to say Mr. Bram definitely is not for me. This book left me not only angry at the end but with a sense of having wasted my time. I was going to give up on it about a third of the way in but I mistakenly decided to keep going and by the time I reconsidered I was past the halfway mark and I decided to finish. I had an extreme dislike for the main character, for some of his very childish actions, for the feeling that I had that he somehow expected life to owe him something because things didn't work out the way he had planned, for the way he started a relationship, for the way he so easily cheated on his partner and how he rationalized his actions, and for how when his partner did not respond with the drama he had expected, he was disappointed and angry and then felt like he was the one who had been somehow wronged. I've seen many very good reviews for this book and I'm glad other people liked it but I cannot recommend it at all

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### **Dana says**

In the week since I finished reading this, I've been trying to figure out how I feel about it, and I'm coming up a bit short. I didn't dislike reading it, but I can't really think of something I liked about it.

I had a few problems with the book. Bram employs a few time jumps that cut up the story unsatisfactorily. For instance, after a brief semi-courtship, the main character, Joel, throws himself into a relationship with the first boy he likes, tells his family he's gay, and then -- it's three years later and Joel is questioning if he's really in love. For me, it was hard to care, since Bram hardly shows a believable relationship to start with. And then, as things with Joel and his boyfriend hit their lowest point, we get an epilogue that's set a year later and an ambiguous ending.

While all this relationship "drama" is happening, the largest section of the book is about Joel helping his sister, Liza, hide herself and her daughter from the husband she's decided to leave. On the one hand, I admire that there's more to the plot than just relationship woes, but Liza and her husband are tiresome and the plot becomes repetitive as it takes over the book.

So I guess, the more I think about it the less I like it. I will say, I liked this a whole lot more than the only other Bram novel I've read, *Hold Tight: A Novel*, which frankly is a ridiculous book.

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### **Virgowriter (Brad Windhauser) says**

To a little bit to get into the story but when I did I really got invested in the story and characters. Felt like a very really handling of a gay relationship. A few interesting twists with plot that felt natural rather than forced just to make a turn. Much sharper book than *Hold Tight*.

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## **George says**

Summary: After a well-written subtexty intro at boy scout camp, the story digresses into a repetitive and not really engaging five year relationship between two of the boys as adults. There's also quite a bit about the family members of one of the boys. Once you sit through a sequence of his unsympathetic adulterous encounters, the story finally throws a mild curve ball, but the momentum it gains sort of dribbles into a weak ending.

Thoughts: One more unmemorable book about dysfunctional people. Geez. This is one of those books that makes you think, gosh, I'm glad I'm not in a relationship. I don't know if that's better or worse than one that makes you think, gosh, I wish I were in a relationship. Anyway, the ending was, as expected, retardedly inconclusive (unless you really stretch your imagination). I have other books by Bram and I'm torn between avoiding them altogether, saving them for later when I have a better chance of appreciating them, or reading them now in the hopes that he got better after the first novel. Hmm.

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## **Annette Gisby says**

I'm not sure what to make of this novel. On the one had it is an interesting read on coming out and coming to terms with your sexuality in the 1970s/1980s, but I didn't really get a sense of time at all. It could have been set in today's world and it wouldn't have lost anything.

The book is told from Joel's point of view and the first person point of view is not one of my favourites to read. I'm always wondering what the other characters felt and thought, and we only get Joel's opinions as to what they might be feeling.

It is an interesting read and I enjoyed Joel's growth from scared youth wondering if he was really gay, to his acceptance of himself and others later on. What I didn't like was the time jumps in some certains, such as "Three years later I went back to Switzerland." I wanted to know what happened in the three years in between. The relationship between Joel and Corey felt a bit glossed over, we're told they are in love etc., but only because Joel as the narrator told us so. They are in a relationship, but it's not a romance, as we as readers don't get to see them on their journey as they fall in love, we come back to them in New York when they are already an established couple.

The writing is good, very solid and flows really well, some of it is quite poetic in places but a lot of the characters besides Joel and Corey fell a bit flat for me, almost as if they were caricatures of themselves. Since we are only relying on Joel's narration, it might be the way he viewed them, so a lot of them don't get much depth.

I was expecting more of a romance between Joel and Corey and we didn't quite get it. I'm not sure I would class it as a romance, more of a gay drama, and a lot of the book focuses on Joel's sister and her boyfriend and, then husband, Bob Kearney. I wanted more about Joel and Corey, I wasn't all that interested in what happened with the rest of Joel's family.

I think my expectations of a romance were what made it that little bit disappointing for me, as it is a good book, but just not the one I was expecting, so a solid four from me.

Review copy from Netgalley.

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### **\_inbetween\_ says**

Argh! So, after heaving my heart torn apart in Hold Tight, I skimmed the ending of this, Bram's first novel, and while it looked scarily break-up-y, nobody seemed dead. Loving on the first chapters like on all Bram's writing, I was sorry to see first a one year jump and then a three year one (just when it got interesting; but that's gay lit, and actually good writing about sex).

The whole big long middle is het Kearney's raging after his escaped wife though, and I'm still hoping Bram is just using text very well to make a point with the whole rather than any individual povs or scenes. I do think that Kearney in the end won't be as right as he might come across in the face of Joel's unreliable narratormess (which, already exposed, no longer is unreliable) or Joel's father's wrongs.

And I still hope there'll be flashbacks, as much as I hate them usually, to clear up what happened in the "happy" years of Joel/Corey. And that there'll be good sex between them and hope, please, not just a flashforward and pain, mibble.

The bulk if it also makes me think that Chris Kenry must have read and liked it, cp. Casanova (incl. Switzerland/Netherlands).

I chose this book (and Hold Tight) partly for what I gleaned from scant summaries and reviews as the two most monogamous, happy books of his (hah) as for the title, and together with Will Eaves' Nothing to Be Afraid Of, they are my favourite titles ever (she says, thinking it unwise coz likely to want to use it for own fic). Now that the frankly stinking ex-library book is nearly finished, I already go into withdrawal, not having any more books of Bram available anywhere \*craves\*

As the book drives towards its conclusion, I find myself speeding faster than their car through the pages, impatient yet CRAVING their conversation to be longer, even if it might seem overlong to others. I wanted more explanations, more talking, even if the characters talked quite a lot, but there seem frighteningly few pages left to hear about things only hinted at AND have the "I don't love him" undone \*sad sap\*

ETA:

Everyone seems to feel it, how there's no aim or purpose in this world, except for those thriving on speculation and exploitation.

Despite lack of any evidence, I think some (non-nasty non-mainstream-romance writers) still wished that if you loved someone, the delight in their existence would make your existence worthwhile.

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### **Neet says**

I read this novel eons ago when it came out in paperback. I had the paperback, but it got so torn and worn that I put it out of its misery. I re-read the book in the kindle format and boy what a wonderful read. The MC is Joel, who when the novel begins is 17 years old. His father, Jake, has dropped him off at a Boy's Scout

camp as a summer counselor. Jake is selfish, narcissistic, and just a plain awful father. Joel has been going to a boarding school in Switzerland and assumes he will be going back to finish up his course work. Jake has other plans, Joel's mother( who is divorced from Jake), sister, and grandmother live on a farm not to far from the camp. Jake takes Joel out of the camp and decides that he'll be staying there instead of going back to boarding school. Joel isn't happy with this development. Also, his father who has a long career at the CIA claims poverty in the case of paying for his son's college education. The novel takes place in the 70's. Joel meets a young man at the camp who he will meet again in Virginia. Corey is his name, and Joel tries to convince himself that he's not gay, attracted to Corey, and that if anything he's bi. Also, Liza ( who is Joel's older sister) is trying to convince herself she's not in love with young man who was a counselor at the camp and now is in the Army. I won't say what else happens, but this is a good read and a novel I always go back to.

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### **James Montgomery says**

Read this novel after it was banned from our public library (I lived in the Deep South), and it helped me a lot as a gay boy who was lost and confused. Not so much for the story itself, but for the fact that it came to EXIST at all in our library, at least for about a week. It was my first experience with ready a gay novel, and I will always remember it as being one of the books that help set me at ease with who I am.

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### **Ray says**

The blurb on the front of the book said the book was funny. I never found any funny. It was real and a good read. Funny? No.

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### **Rafe Jadison says**

Before you simply picked up your ereader and typed "gay" into the search bar, there were those wonderful years where you desperately searched through the fiction section hoping that something was written was written by a gay author. Surprising Myself was one of those rare finds that teenage me was elated to find. I was even more thrilled to read it and realize that it was an amazing book. It follows the life two young men as they move through life. I remember that it was the first gay book I had read that wasn't gloomy and depressing. Bram's characters are well thought out and believable. I recommend this story to anyone.

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### **multitaskingmomma says**

**Update! Read the excerpt of Surprising Myself by Christopher Bram:Celebrating The Digital Release Of Christopher Bram's: Surprising Myself**

### **4.5 Stars**

Christopher Bram published an Op-Ed in the Advocate about his experience as a gay Boy Scout:

"Being a Boy Scout saved my life," writes Bram. "I was a bookish, introverted kid, shy and withdrawn, unhappy and easily bullied. I was also gay, although I didn't know it yet. I should've been miserable. But being a scout got me out of myself and into the world."

As I was reading *Surprising Myself*, I had CNN on when I heard that finally, the Boy Scouts of America had voted to ease their ban on their gay youth members but had not removed it from their leaders. This vote places an end to a hundred years' worth on banned gay boy scouts.

Such a timely announcement when I was reading *Surprising Myself*, a tale about a seventeen-year-old Joel who manages to convince himself that he can't be gay if he's straight. After four years of living with relatives in Switzerland, seventeen-year-old Joel Scherzenlieb finds himself in the United States for the summer, working at a Boy Scout camp. There, he meets nineteen-year-old Corey Cobbett, a fellow counselor who's the only person Joel wants to be friends with. Soon, Joel's sarcastic, distant CIA father shows up and whisks him away to live with his mother, grandmother, and older sister on a farm in Virginia—he's not going back to Switzerland after all. As his father pleads poverty and his dreams of going to college vanish, Joel faces his longest year yet. But everything changes when Corey returns to his life, bringing with him the discovery and excitement of reciprocal love.

The tale goes on to narrate the growth of Joel. His passed and failed experiments on gay and straight life, his love for Corey, his indiscretions – all in the effort to find out if he is really gay or not. Although his actions test Corey's trust in him, it is a necessary experience for Joel, deep down, hates himself. Bram's comment of how he was gay and yet did not realize it mimics the plight of Joel.

This is a growing-up as well as a coming-out story set in the 1970s, when the United States had barely gotten through their African American panic and were now thrust into a world of homosexuality, the time of homosexual panic. In a way, although this is set in the '70s, this book very much reflects the world we live in today. Advocates of the anti-gay movement are panicking as they see their foundations crumble under the cry for change and acceptance in America. Although it is slow to come, more and more States and countries are opening their minds and laws to finally accept that the GLBT community is here to stay so they may as well accept them or face the consequences of denial and self-loathing that they are living with this today, in their lifetime.

First published in 1987, Christopher Bram worked on this novel for seven years, and in this process he produced three drafts that were much longer than this final version. Although this is not an autobiography, it slowly turned to one as in the process of writing and rewriting, he meets his own Corey and what was a comedy of errors became a more meaningful story about love as a situation.

If I have to mention one weakness in *Surprising Myself*, it would be that of the sub-story that is Liza and her husband Robert Kearney. The author focused on this messed up relationship quite a bit, however, I do see that it parallels Joel's own unhappiness at his own happiness.

Of all of the written words in this book, below is probably my favorite:

"We were a household, a family, only by accident. There was no authority to follow or react against. Corey and I were only an accident, without Corey's journal or my feelings having enough authority to justify or condemn us. There was no telling what would become of us. But here on the roof, the two of us straining every muscle yet remaining perfectly still, grinning at

each other to distract ourselves from the buzzing in our arms, the accident froze a few minutes and felt as permanent as knowledge.”

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*Review based on ARC sent by Netgalley*

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### **Jim says**

This novel turned out to be a challenge in my rereading binge of Bram's novels. He's great at creating narrators and protagonists who aren't entirely likeable, a bold decision.

Joel's teen days at camp, and his budding awareness as gay, make up the first part of the novel. His relationship with Corey is truncated by a time gap. Most of the novel deals with his sister's troubled relationship with her husband, the return of their absent father into their lives, and his mother and grandmother's lives on a Virginia farm.

It's clear that the comparison between a straight marriage and a gay relationship are an important aspect of this family drama. The concept of love and loyalty are debated. But the later scenes of "hide the baby" are a bit overplayed. Still, it's an interesting variation from the usual 'happy ending' stories of the era.

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