



## Children of the Sun

*Max Schaefer*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) 

# Children of the Sun

*Max Schaefer*

## **Children of the Sun** Max Schaefer

1970: Fourteen-year-old Tony becomes seduced by Britain's neo-Nazi movement, sucked into a world of brutal racist violence and bizarre ritual. It's an environment in which he must hide his sexuality, in which every encounter is potentially deadly.

2003: James is a young writer, living with his boyfriend. In search of a subject, he begins looking into the Far Right in Britain and its secret gay membership. He becomes particularly fascinated by Nicky Crane, one of the leaders of the neo-Nazi movement who came out in 1992 before dying a year later of AIDS.

The two narrative threads of this extraordinarily assured and ambitious first novel follow Tony through the seventies, eighties, and nineties, as the nationalist movement splinters and weakens; and James through a year in which he becomes dangerously immersed in his research. After risky flirtations with individuals on far right websites, he starts receiving threatening phone calls—the first in a series of unexpected events that ultimately cause the lives of these two very different men to unforgettably intersect.

*Children of the Sun* is a work of great imaginative sympathy and range—a novel of unblinking honesty but also of deep feeling, which illuminates the surprisingly thin line that separates aggression from tenderness.

## **Children of the Sun Details**

Date : Published August 17th 2010 by Soft Skull Press

ISBN : 9781593762971

Author : Max Schaefer

Format : Paperback 391 pages

Genre : Fiction, Lgbt, Historical, Historical Fiction, Glbt, Queer, Politics, Contemporary

 [Download Children of the Sun ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Children of the Sun ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online Children of the Sun Max Schaefer**

---

## From Reader Review Children of the Sun for online ebook

### Billy says

I started this read with high hopes, but was sorely disappointed. Strangely, the disappointment doesn't come from any fault of Schaefer's, but this is a classic instance of wrong place and wrong time to read Children of the Sun. Eight times out of ten when I sat to read this piece, I could not clear my head or would get easily distracted with everything else. This is why I chose not to grade this one because it wouldn't be fair. I understood the gist of the plot, but still don't even know what one of the protagonist's name is without looking at the back cover. It may go without saying, but the sex scenes were the only parts of the book I was able to follow. There were so many battles and scuffles and fights that I just lost track. It kind of read like a boring history book...that is, if boring history books had raunchy/explicit sex scenes in them.

---

### Rob says

A fascinating period of history that is currently the subject of much new historical research, largely due to the Routledge Fascism and the Far Right book series. Unfortunately, I didn't quite feel that the author does the subject - a heady mix of National Front and gay culture - justice. There are times when he tries to emulate David Peace but instead manages to conjure up memories of John King's schlocky football hooligan books - this follows the format of two distinct narratives - one from the present day and one from the 70s and 80s. Of course the book is interesting in the light of current political events - it was written in 2010 and so before the Far Right's recent resurgence.

---

### Beatrix says

Max Schaefer's debut "Children of the Sun" falls into a genre I hardly ever read, in fact it's well outside my usual comfort zone. What could be further away from my own life experience, i.e. that of a pretty liberal minded married woman, than that of a gay skinhead living in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s?!?! An exciting book cover and a text that includes copies of newsprint from those times promise an interesting perspective into a very strange world.

Schaefer gives us two fictional storylines, alternating between Tony, a young skinhead and clandestine gay and his life during the 1970s and 1980s, and James who is openly gay living with his boyfriend in London in 2003, and starts research for a film project on the life of Nicky Crane, a real-life neo-Nazi and openly gay man who died of Aids in the 1990s. Tony's life is filled with violence and secretive encounters. James, who narrates his experiences in the 1st person appears as a middle class young man whose growing fascination with the neo-Nazi subculture worries his friends.

I was quite impressed how Schaefer uses language to immerse the reader into those different worlds that over time become closer and closer. Tony's dialogues are rough and violent, James much more intellectual and emotional. In addition to this are the copies of far-right newsprints as well as a few regular newspapers.

The result is that the characters have time to develop on their own in a very non-judgemental way. Some of the most memorable scenes for me are ones where skinhead Tony beats up an innocent black man or tries to pick up a young man for a one-nighter - and I feel like I'm right in his head seeing the world through his eyes. I feel sympathy for him on his way to prison more so than for the poor black guy who'll end up in the

hospital.

The intent of this book is quite ambitious and creates some very memorable scenes. But in parts Schaefer doesn't quite fulfill it. As much as I like the intent of using language and style to describe the different worlds it sometimes makes for some very difficult reading. There are words that are unfamiliar to me (British?), too many names and fractions of different neo-Nazi groups to keep track of, dialogues that hint at something but not quite tell me what's going on. Considering that most readers will find the world described in the book utterly foreign there need to be more explicit explanations to make sense of it.

In conclusion, I'm very glad that I picked up this book giving me an insight into a foreign world that we all need to be able to better understand. Some more editing could have really helped to take this book from a good one into an outstanding one.

---

### **Stephanie says**

Terrible beginning to middle; it was just endless pages of exposition and excessive detailing of the formation of various splinter groups of the larger British neo-nazi movement. Tony's narrative in particular dragged on. I must admit though, the ending was unexpectedly tender and earned the book an extra star. I'm not sure if I just couldn't get into it because of my relative lack of experience with the culture of various far-right groups or that the writing was just not the best. For fulfilling a niche as specific as gay neo-nazis (or, even more specifically, gay British neo-nazis) it is certainly a successful book of entertainment. As a piece of literature, it is somewhat lacking. If this book is to Max Schaefer what short stories were to Truman Capote, the man might have some potential. It is all too expected that this particular author will fall to either the clutches of niche marketing of cultural products in a depressingly Horkheimerian way or into the abyss of obscure mediocrity.

---

### **Kartik says**

This book never loses its dogged focus, and its frantic pace - Just like the skinheads it's about. It explores the politics of hate from the perspective of the individual, the sense of belonging they seek. An interesting touch is the juxtaposition of the liberalism of the modern world with the identity crisis of the post war generations that seemed to have made them pick up hate as an outlet. Schaefer eschews any superfluous, flowery prose, providing a steady stream of almost journalistic detail while still managing to inject his own brand of angular, jarring imagery.

---

### **Stewart Home says**

When I first heard about Children of the Sun, I assumed the title was taken from the classic sixties psyche single of the same name by The Misunderstood, but anyone who reads the book can see that it actually invokes Savitri Devi, a particularly bonkers and unpleasant exponent of post-war Nazi occultism, and one of the founding members of the World Union of National Socialists. That said, the focus of this 'novel' is very much on English neo-Nazi scum of the Thatcher era; although Devi does appear in extended fictional form, partly on account of the fact that she died in England on the same day that the moronic bonehead band Skrewdriver played their comeback gig in London.

The book intercuts two narratives, which are joined at the end. One is about a lumpen south London secretly gay Nazi skinhead called Tony; and the other concerns the middle-class liberal James, whose family is financially supporting his research into the far-Right, so that he can write a TV script about British Movement activist and amateur porn star Nicky Crane. Schaefer uses the first narrative to undermine reader expectations, his main character Tony is complete low-life, and in every fight sequence I was rooting for him to be annihilated; so it was a major disappointment that this piece of trash survives right the way through to the end of the book.

Read the full review here: <http://stewarthomesociety.org/blog/ar...>

---

### **Jayne Charles says**

It's hard to form a cohesive opinion on this book, even to decide whether I liked it. What cannot be denied is the depth and thoroughness of the author's research. The reader is immersed in the world of the far right movement in the 70s, 80s and 90s, a world of skinheads and Nazi salutes, and the chapters are interspersed with copies of posters, newspaper articles and general memorabilia from those days. One of the chief characters is carrying out research into gay membership of the National Front for a possible documentary, and at times it can make for uncomfortable reading as Nazi propaganda is churned out across the page with little criticism to balance.

I enjoyed the high quality of the writing for the most part, though there were times, as the events reached the 1980s, when it began to plod, the narrative moved through an interminable cycle of bars, riots and urinals, and events were so slow I could almost believe I was reading them in real time.

The most difficult element of it for me was establishing what point the book was making. If it was to demonstrate the shifting attitudes to gay relationships over the years it succeeded. The far right stuff was a puzzle, though. Was the author, through his first-person narrator, suggesting that it was hypocritical of the National Front to demonise gays when many of its members were gay? Was he saying 'actually you can be gay and a thug', or complaining that gay members had to hide their sexuality and should have been able to be open about it? Whichever way I looked at it, I couldn't imagine Nazi sympathies would be cause for any kind of pride, gay or otherwise. The character who appraises the narrator's documentary proposal summed up some of my puzzlement : "...The politics are oddly hard to fathom. I know where you stand on neo-nazism but other people won't. It doesn't help that some of the nazi characters seem oddly sympathetic – not least when many of the others are, frankly, cocks." Exactly.

---

### **Jeffrey Richards says**

Children of the Sun is the story of gay two boys/men at different times in England: Tony, who is 14 in 1970 when first introduced and on the brink of entering the neo-Nazi movement in England (the bulk of his story takes place in the 1980s); and James who is in his mid- to- late-20s in present day England and already engrossed in a writing project focusing on the neo-Nazi movement of the 1980s and enamored of Nicky Crane, a semi-famous skinhead who eventually comes out as gay.

The author, Max Schaefer, does a great job of keeping these two story lines separate yet entwined as he alternates them with each new chapter, with the story of Tony ultimately being more successful than that of James. He excellently captures the essence of 1980s Britain and the harsh, ugly, and dangerous world of the

nationalist movement(s) that Tony navigates with a less-than-stellar savviness that keeps the reader nervous for him throughout. There's something about Tony that made me feel he was trapped by the choices he'd made at such a young age and the author plays into this with some very well-written claustrophobic scenes that truly heighten the tension of the story. I was rooting for Tony throughout, which is a testament to Max Schaefer's writing and story construction.

The present-day story of James didn't have the same intensity as he falls under the spell of his research into the skinhead movement and continues to "swoon" over Nicky Crane, much to the annoyance and, eventual concern, of his friends, boyfriend, and sister. The secondary characters in this storyline were not as well-drawn as the ones in Tony's world. They were definitely more one-dimensional and flat. James is the fullest character but even he - and his motivations - read a bit on the sketchy side.

The ending felt a bit rushed for me. And the final scene could have been explored more fully. As it stands, I felt slightly deflated by the ending. But overall, I truly enjoyed the book, the story, and especially the writing.

---

### **Elwycke says**

I admire Mr.Schaefer for attempting to write a novel about quite a difficult subject matter. But I kept losing interest in the narrative and didn't much care about the contemporary characters. Perhaps a straightforward non-fiction book about Nicky Crane and his cohorts might've been more successful.

What a contradictory lot they were! Paki-bashing one minute and sieg-heiling all over the place, then off to a reggae club for a spot of dancing before tottering home to shag one another. OK, so I'm over-simplifying! But that's what it boiled down to.

It's a fascinating story, but for me this book didn't tell the tale very well.

---

### **O says**

I'm ambivalent about this novel, Schaefer's writing is certainly like I've never seen before, informal and subjective at some points, vulgar and objective at others, however his story failed to keep me hooked long enough, it had no message to give and got lost in a thick verbosity, even he seemed to have given up on it eventually. Ultimately I found myself finishing the book with zero idea of what Schaefer was trying to say or what had become of his characters.

---

### **John says**

The memory of this one has lingered on..

It's a very ambitious book. It charts the rise and fall of the Far Right in Britain 1970 -mid 90s, and especially the right's hard core foot soldiers – neo nazi skinheads. Each chapter of the novel is prefaced by cuttings from national newspapers, music papers, magazines of the left and right and the occasional skinzine with pictures of the likes of Nicky Crane and his fellow traveller, Ian Stuart Donaldson, (ISD) lead singer of the white power band Skrewdriver.

The novel is therefore partly grounded in fact and some of the characters appearing are/were real. It opens with the 14 year old Tony who gets his kicks (pun intended!) from being a part of the skinhead movement, the white power part, lots of violence and racist rock concerts and furtive homo sex. The latter is given extra edge because it goes against the essential creed of the neo nazis. A prominent member of the fascist British Movement and right hand man of ISD, Nicky Crane, is actively gay. When not "cleansing the streets" by night of racial "filth" (he was a dust man in the day time) going to prison for his trouble, he was acting as a bouncer at a well known London gay club. When he dies of AIDS in 1993, shortly after ISD's death in a car smash, the movement has fragmented and is falling apart. We follow Tony at the (second) battle of Waterloo – Anti Nazi League v the White Power skins and a more politically correct wing. Afterwards the two latter factions will knock hell out of each other.

Fast forward to the new millennium when being skinhead became a bit of a fashion accessory. James, a young journalist who happens to be gay with a skinhead – Mark II type – boyfriend, becomes obsessed with the story of Nick Crane and the nationalist movement. Through James fact and fiction will start to merge and fresh challenges and questions will arise. Eg - was ISD bumped off?

This reminded me somewhat of Boxer Beetle, similar themes and the same unsettling moves in time, backwards and forwards.

Interesting read..

---

## **Cristina says**

Max Schaefer's Children Of The Sun is a novel that forced me well out of my political comfort zone. The ideologies connected to the skinhead movement - or at least to most of it - make me cringe, to say the least, but I couldn't help but find this book compelling in a sort of hypnotic way. I frowned and grimaced at the Nazi chants, the cheap racist slurs, the violence, the taste for senseless bloodshed and, yet, I wanted to know more about the characters and their stories.

The novel's structure is ambitious and challenging and throughout the book, we follow two characters but not two parallel stories. Tony's narrative arc starts in the early 1970s when he's a teenager getting close to the skinhead movement while discovering a sexuality that must be lived in secrecy and kept hidden at all costs from his mates. Jumping ahead to the early 2000s we meet James: posh, well-educated, slightly adrift and with artistic ambitions ('[...] what I really want to do is write screenplays [...] like every fucking other person.'). His relationship with Adam, a young man who likes play-acting the part of the skinhead and has a penchant for seedy sexual encounters that James finds at once unsettling and alluring, will push him to investigate the depths of the skinhead underworld under the pretence of working on a script project.

Through Tony's experiences and James's research, Schaefer takes us on a historical and political journey through the constantly shifting world of the British right-wing movements and we're introduced to a number of its key figures, from Ian Stuart Donaldson (leader of the white power rock band Skrewdriver) to Nicky Crane (view spoiler).

Neither of the main characters is sympathetic or particularly nice - I did feel somewhat sorry for the way Tony has to live his life constantly guarding his secret, the urgency with which he lives his existence and embraces his awful ideals made him in my eyes at one time repulsive and tragic. James, on the other hand, is often selfish and self-centred and comes across as childish for the stubbornness with which he pursues his compulsions and inadequacies masquerading them with a veneer of intellectual pretentiousness. The novel's

final part shows them confused, alone and adrift.

The novel is seedy and darkly erotic but also rich with historical reconstructions - appearing also in the form of leaflets and fanzines reproduced in between the chapters - and, although I can understand the importance of guiding the readers through the complex world of the fascist and neo-nazi underworlds, I found these parts slightly patronising and tedious at times.

The novel is in any case very interesting and poignant in a sort of deeply uncomfortable way. It was an unexpected discovery and, although not everyone's cup of tea, I can certainly recommend it.

A solid 3.5.

Pic.: Nicky Crane and a friend photographed by Nick Knight in Goulston Street (1979-1980)

---

### **Sean McLachlan says**

During the 1970s and 80s, the United Kingdom saw a large rise in neo-Nazi groups. One of the main figures in this was a tough street brawler named Nicky Crane. What many of his fellow skinheads didn't know, or chose to ignore, was that Crane was gay. In fact, there was a whole lot of gays in a movement that denounced gays as perverts and often participated in gay bashing.

That odd bit of history is the basis for this novel, which follows the adventures of a young gay skinhead growing up in those times, and also a gay researcher from the modern day looking into Britain's fascist past. The researcher is, one presumes, trying to figure out why so many gays ended up being neo-Nazis. Some other reviews of this book complain that this question is never answered. I suspect that's because the question is unanswerable. I don't blame the author for this because I certainly don't have an explanation for it!

I do, however, have some problems with this book, which gave me one of the most uneven reading experiences I've ever had. The story of Tony, a teenager growing up in the neo-Nazi movement of the 1970s, is riveting. We get an inside look at how groups like the National Front operated, and we get a feeling for Tony's split identity, fueled by his infatuation/hero worship of Nicky Crane.

I had no sympathy, however, for James, a modern day trust fund baby researching the movement by looking at old fanzines and leaflets in the British Library. James is obviously a stand in for the author, and we get pages upon pages of chattering class pretension about fine dinners, expensive French cider, and an unearned sense of superiority. Why is it that British writers of a certain social class can never stray far from their comfort zones? As my wife pointed out, the author was playing to the interests of his publisher's audience: "Granta readers need this reassurance." I suppose they do. It comes off as the literary equivalent of a "safe space" for rich people.

So I found myself increasingly annoyed by James, who had nothing to add to the story other than his own self-obsession. Still, the writing is excellent, and the book is illustrated with reproductions of old National Front literature that make for fascinating reading. If the author had the guts to cut out James entirely, and only keep Tony's story, this would have been a five-star book.

---

### **Kate O'Hanlon says**

I'm jumping the gun a little here but I'm going to go ahead and call this my favourite book published in 2010.

Schaefer draws his neo-Nazi characters as real and sympathetic people while at the same time never letting them off the hook for their crimes and lunatic beliefs. An easy route to go would have been to keep our sympathies with Tony by portraying him as an innocent, seduced and led astray by far right beliefs but Schaefer refuses this easy way out. Tony's racist beliefs are genuine, he knows exactly what he's getting into and he remains unrepentant to the last.

We're drawn into Tony's world and made to care about him even as we revile him because Tony is not a monster. He's a bad person, but Schaefer never allows us to lose sight of the fact that he is a person.

The dual narrative is a fantastic device here as James, in the present time-line, takes the place of the reader as he confronts the point at which interest and fascination with fascism becomes fetishisation or endorsement.

---

## Ghostnebula says

Children Of The Sun by Max Schaefer is perhaps the best novel about gay Nazi skinheads I've ever read. OK, that's a pretty niche market yet somehow Max has managed to write a superb debut novel that interweaves the true story of Oi! icon, Nicky Crane who came out as gay in the early 90s and died of Aids not much later with the fictional stories of Tony, another gay skin living through the 70s and 80s skin/NF scene and James, a modern day gay skin researching Crane and Skrewdriver for a possible tv drama.

The James character seems to be semi-autobiographic with Schaefer expertly moving from the present day London gay scene which has long fetishised skin chic with the evolution of the white noise Oi! movement of the late 70s and early 80s that had homos on the same hitlist as blacks, commies and jews. There are newspaper cuttings and fanzine pieces detailing the gory reality of messy neo-Nazi politics and all manner of cranky 'psychogeographic' and occult rituals that somehow feed into the potty world of ye olde crypto-fascist yet somehow this makes it all the more compelling.

Crane himself is a kind of ghostly figure, a monstrous meathead with few if any redeeming features who becomes a bogey man for the likes of Anti-Fascist Action and a hero to the footsoldiers of the NF/BM/BNP. The story of his hidden sexuality and those of other gay skins nevertheless doesn't distract from the brutality of their attacks on asians, blacks, reds and anyone else they regard as enemies. Yet as the internecine cracks appear between competing 'patriot/nationalist' factions (Griffin bringing in Italian neo-fascists to advise the NF for example) their warped world view becomes more and more outdated just as their clothes become entrenched in the past. There's a notable scene when the skins hook up with Chelsea casuals to attack a Bloody Sunday remembrance parade in Trafalgar Square and get chased off by even more ruthless AFA activists, then suffer further humiliations as the 'reds' put them firmly on the back foot.

You almost feel sorry for Tony, who genuinely believes in his racist cause as the whole nationalist movement crumbles around him and he's reduced to posting on gay websites as Arealnazi who will 'rape you and beat you and leave you bleeding' - this is where James, who has a penchant for masochistic humiliation, finally hooks up with someone who actually knew his ultimate quarry, the fascinatingly conflicted BM Leader Guard, Nicky Crane.

There's a kind of 'Midnight Cowboy' feel to the rather pathetic figure of Tony, someone who still wears the uniform of racial, sexual and political oppression, even whilst chasing young cock around town, a lost soul with no family or friends to speak of, living on past glories, ritualising his cartoon sadism, washing his clothes in someone's washing machine, clinging to a music and a sub-culture that has almost vanished. Having been a Cockney Rejects fan myself and a brief devotee of Oi! I remember all too well how easily the reductivist mantra of the Nazis was accepted by working class white lads looking for easy targets to blame for their economic plight. Gary Bushell was Sounds token lefty prole writer at the time and promoted Oi! as

a true representation of (white) working class culture. It was largely thanks to Bushell that the Rejects in particular became a massive group yet no matter how much he protested otherwise (and he protest-eth too much) there was no excuse for putting a well known nazi like Crane on the cover of an LP whose title ws itself a skit on the nazi mantra 'Strength Thru (J)Oi'

Children Of The Sun has its faults; it is over-written in parts with the author trying a bit too hard to show off his way with a sentence and the whole 'novel about a man writing a drama which turns out to be a novel about a gay nazi' shtick is a little self-indulgent but the structure manages to sustain the plot device and time shifts. These are minor criticisms however and ambition in a young writer shouldn't be admonished. Schaefer has written a disciplined, intriguing book about a largely obscure figure that sheds a light on a part of Britain's history that most authors and media commentators would prefer to forget. Even if, like the book, this was originally intended to be a film or tv drama, the quality of the writing puts it on a higher level than mere 'television.' Put your boots and Harrys on!

---

### **Alexandra Carpenter says**

I think for most people, this book would be a challenging read. Not in the writing, but in the subject matter.

I can't imagine what this book would've felt like if I had gone into it cold. Fortunatley, (unfortunately?) I have done more research into the skinhead/neo-Nazi movements than the average person, so I went into it knowing almost every reference. The book gives some context for the recurring references such as Nicky Crane or Skrewdriver, but there are mentions of things like The Turner Diaries, which you would at least have to understand the general plot of and William Pierce's affiliation with the National Alliance. Then there's a reference to the Werewolf Order, which pretty much rockets you into LaVeyan Satanism and Nikolas Schreck's philosophies. They're subtle references, but to balance that on top of the many characters and double story line would have been really tough. Granted, that means I appreciated the book even more because the musical references in particular were basic knowledge.

Overall, I enjoyed the story, though it felt unnecessarily raunchy at times in ways that didn't seem to advance the plot. The ending was a little ambiguous for me, and I tend to like closure.

---

### **Abailart says**

Superb, stupendous, a brilliant new writer has come along. Started this on Friday, now Sunday, almost finished. Watch this space for review.

Life's full of little ironies. I left off reading *Les Miserables* when Hugo went into a seemingly interminable digression about the Battle of Waterloo. I needed a rest so I began reading this as soon as it was given to me. I finished it in two days, coming upon near the end another Battle of Waterloo, this one at Waterloo Station, on 12 September, 1992, and here a vivid and flinty description of all hell breaking loose between the hardened edges of anti-fascist movements and the equally sharp edges of a medley of far right youth fascists, skinheads at this point in time being on both sides. Schaefer's descriptive powers are immense, and if there is a poetry of visceral violence it is here (long with a

most heartbreaking, lyrical counterpart of tenderness which expresses itself physically). The novel opens with an intensely vivid description of homosexual encounter in a public toilet. The unrelenting realism of the sexual and the violent, often crossing into each other, form a helix that can't not draw a fascinated and horrified response from the reader. The dualism of this sort of voyeurism parallels the attractiveness of the S/M dyad, the ugly becomes beautiful, the beautiful and innocent something to be violated and destroyed. The novel's protagonist is James, a public school and university child of parents who look after him during his prolonged adult adolescence during which he is waiting to become a serious artist, a screenwriter no less. There are many like him in the world in which he moves, so obviously this is more than mere fiction. He is fascinated with the Nazi thug Nicola Crane whose brutal physiognomy and stance adorn the book's frontispiece, a facsimile from *Skins International* fanzine, 1983. Crane is one of a list from England's recent history of far right thugs, stretching from the likes of Stuart Donaldson, psycho and front for the Rock against Communism band, Skrewdriver, to the more homely charms of our own Nick Griffin. (It's important to note, for reasons that will become apparent that Donaldson and Griffin too were public school boys). James's researches take him and us on a journey along the contours of the 1970s through to the present factionalisms and vaguely articulated sense of such movements as the British National Socialists, the British Movement, the National Front, the British National Party, Blood and Honour, and sundry others. Insights into aspects their activities – such as military training sessions, infiltration into establishment institutions, music, ideologues, connections with strange European bearers of the mysteries of the swastika (which is the symbol for the wheel of the sun, hence *Children of the Sun*, a blood-stained flag touched by Hitler himself being lugged around London in a duffle bag during our encounter with these insights) – are brought to life with scenarios that border on the grotesque (I don't want to plot spoil but I am referring to a gaga old woman who is too scary to get a part in a horror movie) to the chillingly domestic with a young and earnest Nick Griffin fresh from Cambridge with his leaflets and booklets and intelligent arguments.

Schaefer's constructed his novel so that James's research is embodied in a factual framework with a fictional narrative, the main character being Tony whose story begins and ends the book, the ending though with a contrived but satisfying twist. Tony, like almost all of the characters (at least half of whom are 'semi-fictional': the blurring of fact and fiction is only a literary game, it's largely what the book is about) is broken, violent, tender, inconsistent, intelligent but often inarticulate, swept along and never having the opportunity to grow up. Three kids offer him a glue bag to sniff: he takes it, "I was young once." The structure is very straightforward and works for what the author is doing, certainly presents an uncomplicated reading of the narrative.

Regarding the history covered in the book, I think you'll find it interesting, informative and so on, but I'd like now to turn to some aspects of the novel which lift it towards being very good indeed.

It's about identity, markers, self and other. Of course, it's got political and ideological aspects but there's no didacticism, polemic or answer to a sneaked-in question. It lays stuff brutally on the table in a way that shows quite clearly some underlying patterns to the way we all think. I have alluded to three elements: the erotic, the violent and the tender (the latter connected with joy). The tensions between these generate the power of the novel, of the individual. Identity is made of the private (erotic, tender) that may need the other to share with, yet always throughout the relationship of trust, except in the most marvellously paradoxical way right at the end, is precarious and fragile at best. Identity of self – perhaps only James' boyfriend Adam and some of their middle class friends show a degree of adult autonomy – is the absence which initiates the time-honoured method of finding the self by losing it into the communal. At a gig on Nick Griffin's Daddy's farm, Tony is drawn into the heaving, sweating dancing gang of skins, at first conscious of the erotic self that he must hide but then, he

**...sees himself repeated in every direction like a hall of mirrors, and understands that this will not wreck him, he is not distinct from it and floating fragile on its surface, but rather it is him, of him and he is part of it, the shouts, the salutes, the *sieg* from within and around him alike. With one force, one voice, he fills the courtyard.**

Yet in one of the smudged photocopies of fanzines and the like that punctuate the novel, we have this in *Square Peg* no.12, 1986, 'Why I'm a Skin':

**(a skin is) able to walk anywhere, his passport the astonishment of the sharp mind in the brainless stereotype...**

**...This animal's only secondary sexual characteristics are his braces, worn up to exaggerate the width of his shoulders, down to emphasise the curve of his bum.**

Another scene (I won't describe it in detail, it is worth savouring) evokes a Tea Dance with an assortment of the oddest, weirdest, most outlandishly dressed and styled couples and it is here that explicit reference to the word joy is made. Tenderness exists elsewhere too in the little details of lovers' rituals, yet for the most part it is trodden down (often literally) by sadism, often greeted by paid for masochism. Somehow in the Square Peg quotation and the desire by Adam – a successful BBC producer – to dress as a skin, and to go to S/M skin club and be utterly humiliated, and many other instances of the conflation of dress, power, identity, violence, eroticism, gender simply saturate the novel's 'content' (at the level of 'representing' some attributes of the far right movements at a small period of history): James' intuition that after all his searching in the British Library and other conventional research, he has to find whatever he is looking for by finding out how the virtually absent Nicola Crane feels. England is not about England nor was it ever.

To me, there were some disturbing overlaps implied between the descriptions of the Fascist ideologues, the 'thinkers' and the counterpart in any demagoguery of the 'far Left'. Even the mystical mumbo jumbo James gets sidetracked into studying then taking on board to the point of becoming paranoid has its symmetry between right and left. The Nazi mythologies are well known, but it's worth pointing out that you won't have to click many times to find sites with Deleuze and John Dee sharing the spotlight. The use in the novel of the London Psychogeographical Society's speculations on the pyramid at the top of Canary Wharf (reprinted in the novel) fits in these days with the more Waterstones texture of psychogeography (indeed Schaefer includes an opening epigram from Iain Sinclair's *Suicide Bridge*). The Battle of Waterloo has an awful symmetry about it, and when the police throw a cordon around all the skins to escort them out of the station, they little know that half of the skins have turned, or always been, commie.

More traditionally, old school tensions rise. Piques James turns on his lover, Adam: "This whole sub-skin thing. You get your rocks off by dressing on the *ne plus ultra* of the lumpenproletariat and pretending you're powerless. It's classic English guilt." Complementing such traditional complaints, there is a diatribe elsewhere against petit bourgeois grammar schools yearning to be like public schools, and the pathetic guy Adam and James go to see for a whipping who turns out to be a wimp with a longing to meet public school boys. It's these little touches – that public schools aren't accidentally mentioned on many occasions – that do remind us that while all this stuff is going on there's a class system out there, and an elite grinding happily away. Fight on, boys.

Schaefer has a sharp eye for the urban detail, just enough slant on something to conjure up the whole. London as, like the S/M tension, horribly fascinating and attractive, a wasteland and pulsing with life at the same time. He gives his more vacuous characters enough words to hang themselves with, his authorial voice an ironic comment rather than the ornate showmanship it may appear to be if you don't see just how careful he is to maintain precisely the right distance while being intimately connected with every level of the novel's workings. Some feat.

He's a clever writer, but doesn't show off. My guess is that the 'solipsistic cunt' who drove across Tottenham Court Road during the anti-Iraq war march is a character from Ian McKewan's *Saturday* (also a novel about identity but, well, a bit different). Mind you, when James' sister has a go at him for making his parents remortgage the house so they can keep supporting their lazy jobless pseudo-artist son, she calls him a

‘solipsistic prick’.

But remember, whatever, whether they’re real clothes, or clothings of ideas, concepts, fantasies, ideologies in the end they are all just skins. We are made of the erotic, the violent, and if we’re lucky, the tender. The rest is just “as if quotation marks swarmed about me like moths.”

---

### **J. says**

If I could give this one more than 5 stars, I would. The book is so good it makes me want to babble, to recommend it to everyone I know in real life whether they would like transgressive gay fiction or not. I've been wracking my brain the last several days wondering how an author this fucking good could only have one novel (as far as I can tell).

I never knew I was interested in the life of a gay skinhead before, but now I just want to sit down and read this book over again. The last chapter hit me like a gutpunch, but so did many of the others, too.

Go get this book immediately.

(and Max, if you're out there, come back--we need you!)

---

### **Merredith says**

This is a book about british neo-nazis in the 1970s and 80s, and in particular about the gay subset that existed, kind of rather openly, within it. SUPER random topic, but this was sitting on the new book shelf at the library and i thought it might be interesting. It was. It's fiction (historical fiction, I guess, so recent though), but it's almost non fiction. This book is about a guy living in the UK in the 90s who is trying to be a writer and rather randomly decides to research and write about Nicky Crane, who was a real person, a british neo-nazi skinhead activist who came out as gay before he died, but was pretty well known to be the entire time. He gets very caught up in the whole thing and it becomes an obsession. the chapters are interspersed with real newspaper clippings, ads, concert flyers and the like, and then following those, interspersed the story of Tony, a fictional neo-nazi who was experiencing all of this himself, whatever was in the articles. He was gay and slightly knew Nicky. It all goes back and forth and is pretty slow reading, just because there's so much to absorb, so many facts, so many organizations and names and dates and such. Really interesting to see these people's point of view, all explained out logically. If you like reading about random things, or reading about recent history, try this book.

## Mark says

I enjoyed this book, though I thought there were a few problems with the story that didn't work for me. Without giving spoilers, I'll just say that some ideas were presented that would later play into the psychology of how one of the main characters reacted at the end of the book. Although it served that purpose, I think it confused the overall storyline. Instead of making you sympathetic to the character, it made you think, *This author is trying too hard to add a little Dan Brown to it.*

I personally liked the storyline of the character from the 70s/80s. I wish he would have focused more on that character and interjected the character from 2003 a lot less.

---