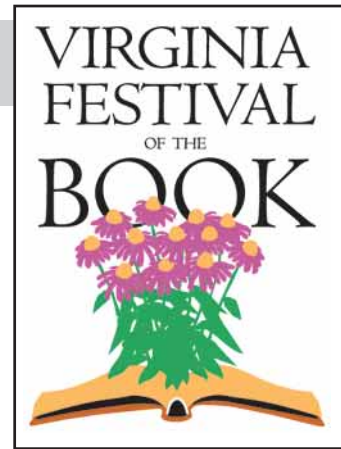


The Misfits by James Howe recommended by Alex Sanchez

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. Every month, guest columnists recommend an outstanding work of adult or children's literature. Alex Sanchez, author of *Rainbow Boys*, an American Library Association 2002 "Best Book for Young Adults," has chosen *The Misfits* by James Howe. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss together a work that raises issues and questions of our times.



One year ago, a milestone book began receiving enthusiastic praise all across our country. *The Misfits*, a novel by famed children's and young adult author James Howe (*Bunnacula*, *Pinky and Rex*, *The Watcher*), honestly and forthrightly tackles issues of name-calling in schools.

Set in the seventh grade, the novel appeals to a broad audience, from older elementary school to early high-school-age readers. The four "misfit" kids of the title include an overweight boy, a too-smart/too-tall girl, a boy branded as a hooligan, and Joe, who at twelve years old already knows he's gay. He feels good about who he is, even as he struggles with his first crush and the realities of homophobia in the world around him.

Together, these four friends form a political party to end name-calling in their school and run for student council. Along the way they learn about politics and popularity, love and loss, and what it means to be a misfit. They are given the chance to stand up and be seen—not as the one-word jokes their classmates have tried to reduce them to, but as the full, complicated human beings they begin to discover they truly are.

In the telling of this entertaining and inspiring story, Howe has placed the sexual orientation issues challenging so many schools today

squarely in the context they belong—that of harassment and discrimination versus inclusion and acceptance.

For children growing up in America, homophobic slurs prevail among the most pervasive and effective forms of verbal bullying, regardless of whether the object of the harassment is actually gay or not.

In recent years, educators have become increasingly aware of the effects of such harassment on the self-esteem, sense of well-being and self-worth of all children. They've also become more knowledgeable about the impact of such persecution on gay and lesbian kids: disproportionately higher rates of almost every self-destructive and at-risk behavior, including absenteeism, truancy, alcoholism, drug abuse, smoking, HIV-infection, STDs, depression, and suicide.

In *The Misfits*, Joe's parents love and accept him as he is. Unfortunately, the same is not true for too many gay and lesbian kids.

According to estimates of the Centers for Disease Control, *every day* four young people in our country take their own lives because of their fear, confusion, and self-hatred around being gay. Thirty-two others attempt to. These are staggering statistics. And they are more than that. These are our children.

Books like *The Misfits* can provide our young people (and us) a way to make sense of their struggles. Such books can, quite literally, help save lives—and give *all* readers a key to empathy, compassion, and understanding.

Alex Sanchez's website, www.AlexSanchez.com, includes a bibliography of books with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters and themes appropriate for children and young adults

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