

A Son Called Gabriel

*by Damian McNicholl
CDS Books, New York*

This semi-autobiographical novel is a first person account of growing up gay in an extremely homophobic environment – Northern Ireland in the 1960's and '70's.

Gabriel Harkin has been harassed by upper form bullies since he first entered school. As he approaches puberty, he begins to feel attraction toward other boys and men rather than girls. Gabriel fights these urges even as his cousin and best friend engage him in same-sex activities. He tries playing rugby, and then finds his talent as a runner on the track.

When Gabriel advances into the pre-college level at St. Malachy's, he tries very hard to transfer his sexual urges toward girls with some success. But even as he is out dancing with his girlfriend, Gabriel makes contact and has a furtive sexual encounter with a young man. At school, he is approached by a priest who is his substitute teacher. As the novel continues, Gabriel faces his increasing acceptance of his homosexuality.

He tells his mother, who promptly takes him to see their priest. After extensive private conversation, the priest reports the Gabriel is "going through a phase" but is not homosexual. At first he is pleased with this judgment – after all, if it is just a phase he won't have to burn in hell. As time passes, he realizes this phase is not going to go away.

Along the way this book shows some of the trials of boys in an all-boy school in late 20th century Ireland against the backdrop of frequent Protestant violence against Gabriel's Roman Catholic family and friends.

Reviewed by Dave Parker