

BOOK REVIEW

These Kids Are Bad to the Bone

THE HINDENBURG CRASHES NIGHTLY

By Greg Hrbek
Avon, 356 pages, \$23

Reviewed by Paul Signorelli

The *Hindenburg Crashes Nightly*, a debut novel by Bay Area writer Greg Hrbek, is a coming-of-age story through a very dark glass. Stylistically dazzling and strong in narrative flow, the book is not for those with weak stomachs. People do physically and emotionally repulsive things to each other as deception is piled on top of deception, violations heaped on other violations.

Just when a reader begins to hope that someone will do the right thing — back down from a lie, decide not to engage in yet another act of cruelty against others — the story becomes even more bleak. Attempts at a guardedly optimistic resolution can hardly erase the acerbic taste after 350 pages of pain and anguish.

We try to avert our eyes, hoping we can will a different outcome simply by imagining one. But we can't, not at the opening of the story, when 7-year-old Thomas Markham and 15-year-old Lindsey Paris meet for the first time, nor at any point during the more than 20 years that follow.

Tom, named by his parents after St. Thomas Aquinas but viewing himself more as Thomas the Doubt-

er, tells us at the beginning that he has not been to confession for many years. He then begins his lengthy confession with hints of what is to come: the death of his mother as she gives birth to Tom's brother, Matthew; a tragedy involving a priest; an older cousin, Marco, whose very presence at a funeral is enough to draw vituperation from Lindsey and Tom; and passages of great poetic beauty.

"I feel myself grow weaker, and slowly surrender, as if to the irresistible embrace of water," the protagonist says as he remembers his first intimacies with Lindsey. "The next few hours are like that. Like sinking through fathoms and leagues, past coral reefs and sunken galleons, monsters of superstition, to the blackness of the ocean, where the fish glow like stars, shooting through a watery night."

The book proceeds with two parallel stories: that of Tom and Lindsey in their first years together, and their later story as adulterers. We cringe and grieve for the youngsters through their losses, horrified as Lindsey undergoes a wrenching violation while Tom watches in shameful helplessness, and we mourn to learn of Lindsey's misguided expiation. It's as if, just when she seeks absolution, she finds herself committing a far greater sin.

The two fare little better as adults. Lindsey, having achieved success as a journalist, is still fleeing the tragedy of her childhood. Tom

works as an animator on a kids' religious program and, in his spare time, is editing a film about "a little boy who works the graveyard shift in the belly of the Hindenburg." He's also struggling with childhood ghosts, including that of the brother whose life caused their mother's death.

The two of them wreak havoc wherever they go. Lindsey has dumped a lesbian lover to dive into a passionless marriage with a filmmaker, who spends his time photographing wildlife in exotic locales. Tom cuckolds him with Lindsey, then commits further betrayal by falling into a passionate liaison with Lindsey's former lover. He then drops the former lover at his first opportunity to return to Lindsey. One wonders if anyone will remain unbedded by the time the story reaches its climax.

Hrbek can hardly be accused of writing solely to titillate. But where can this story possibly go? What redemption can these characters expect? Tom suggests that the entire saga can be seen as the most honest of love letters, an explanation directed to one of the most important people in his life. A nice idea, but we are left wondering whether a recipient of such a confession would grant absolution or simply mark it "return to sender." ■

Paul Signorelli is the director of volunteer services for the San Francisco Public Library.