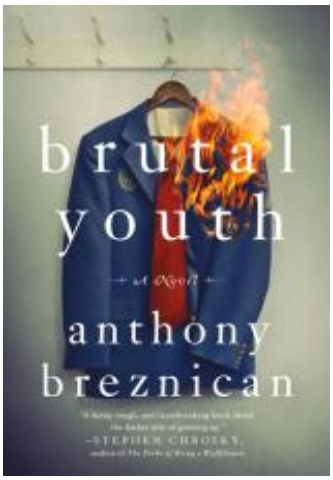
Brutal Youth

by Anthony Breznican



About the Book

Three freshmen must join forces to survive at a troubled, working-class Catholic high school with a student body full of bullies and zealots, and a faculty that's even worse in Anthony Breznican's BRUTAL YOUTH.

With a plunging reputation and enrollment rate, Saint Michael?s has become a crumbling dumping ground for expelled delinquents and a haven for the stridently religious when incoming freshman Peter Davidek signs up. On his first day, tensions are clearly on the rise as a picked-upon upperclassmen finally snaps, unleashing a violent attack on both the students who tormented him for so long, and the corrupt, petty faculty that let it happen. But within this desperate place, Peter befriends fellow freshmen Noah Stein, a volatile classmate whose face bears the scars of a hard-fighting past and the beautiful but lonely Lorelei Paskal --- so eager to become popular, she makes only enemies.

To even stand a chance at surviving their freshmen year, the trio must join forces as they navigate a bullying culture dominated by administrators like the once popular Ms. Bromine, their embittered guidance counselor, and Father Mercedes, the parish priest who plans to scapegoat the students as he makes off with church finances. A coming-of-age tale reversed, BRUTAL YOUTH follows these students as they discover that instead of growing older and wiser, going bad may be the only way to survive.

Discussion Guide

1. The book begins in 1991. How do you think growing up then was different from being in high school today? Has social media become something that reduces cruel behavior by leaving a record for others to see, or does it merely amplify the abuse?

2. Did you feel sympathy or scorn for Colin Vickler, a.k.a. The Boy on the Roof? Did your feelings change when you found out what he had clinking in his bag? What kinship did he feel with those creatures in the jars?

3. Davidek and Stein may have problems with authority, but they obviously mean well and try to help. Why do you think Ms. Bromine resents these two so intensely, especially when there are so many students who are more chaotic and destructive around?

4. Lorelei studies teen movies and magazines, and makes a list of ?rules? in the hope of becoming popular at her new school. What guidance would you give someone who?s trying to start over? (She could use the advice.)

5. Father Mercedes is one of the few characters in the book directly inspired by a real person: In 1998, Father Walter Benz was caught stealing $1.3 million from his Pittsburgh-area church to underwrite gambling debts. Although it was clearly wrong, could you understand the temptation that drove Father Mercedes to do what he did?

6. Hector Greenwill is the only African-American student at St. Mike?s. Was the treatment Green received what you expected? How might things have been different if there were more black students at the school, instead of just one?

7. Smitty says, ?You always know where you stand with an honest asshole. It?s the fake do-gooders you gotta watch out for.? Given what transpires in the rest of the book, is he right?

8. BRUTAL YOUTH puts forth the idea that those people who are most mistreated often mistreat others. Given their backgrounds, why does this idea not hold true for Stein and Mr. Zimmer?

9. How did you feel about the relationship between Hannah Kraut and Mr. Zimmer? Did he behave appropriately the whole time? How would you have preferred things turned out for the two of them?

10. Lorelei was safe --- so why does she commit that betrayal?

11. Sister Maria can be frustrating --- she means well, but is extremely weak-willed and quick to compromise. Did your feelings about her change after what she did in the bathroom to cover up Stein?s absence? Did you like and respect her more --- or less?

12. There?s not a lot of stellar parenting in BRUTAL YOUTH, but which do you think is worse: the constant aloofness of Davidek?s parents, or the sporadic violence of Lorelei?s mother? Why is Lorelei so tender toward her mom, while Davidek is so abrasive toward his?

13. Do you believe Hannah truly cared about Davidek, or was she merely manipulating a naïve freshman to accomplish her own goals? Is it possible that both are true? Do you think she ultimately helped or hurt him?

14. When Davidek learns about his father?s childhood history with The Big Texan, he thinks, ?The things we surrender to when we?re young, we keep surrendering to the rest of our lives.? Do you feel this is true? How do you avoid that without fighting everything?

15. Even the good characters in this story are deeply flawed. What was the worst thing that a character you liked did? By

the time the Hazing Day picnic was over, did you feel Davidek adequately made up for the cruel things he said on the phone to Green?

16. Davidek and Stein believe that following the rules and doing the right thing aren?t always the same. Do you agree? What if everyone at St. Mike?s had obeyed the powers that be? Is resistance a healthy thing?

17. Had you been on the parish council, how would you have voted on the question of whether to close the school?

18. BRUTAL YOUTH begins with statues of the saints being heaved off the roof. By the end of the novel, many of the characters who tried to be good and helpful to others end up being tossed aside as well. They pay a price for sticking their necks out, while the ruthless and selfish endure. Do you believe the good behavior was worth it? Who actually got the happier ending?

Author Bio

Anthony Breznican was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania and graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1998. He has worked as a reporter for *The Arizona Republic*, *Associated Press*, and *USA Today* and is currently a senior staff writer for *Entertainment Weekly*.

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Publication Date: June 2, 2015
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 432 pages
Publisher: St. Martin's Griffin
ISBN-10: 1250067898
ISBN-13: 9781250067890