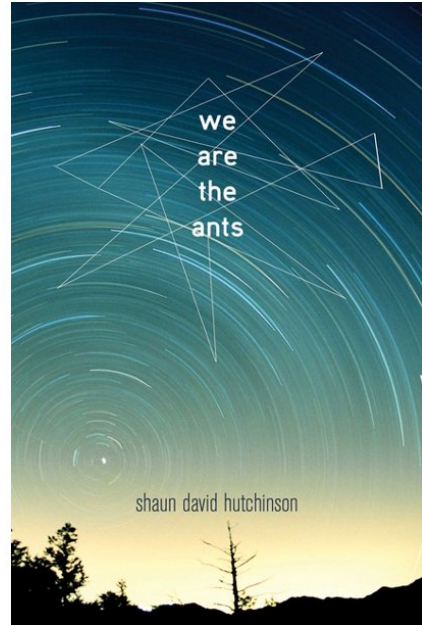


BOOK REVIEW *We Are the Ants* By Shaun David Hutchinson

**PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT
CONTENT**

**SEXUALLY EXPLICIT CONTENT
AVAILABLE AT TEXAS INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL DISTRICTS**



When you break down the things we do every day to their component pieces, you begin to understand how ridiculous they are. Like kissing, for instance. You wouldn't let a stranger off the street spit into your mouth, but you'll swap saliva with the boy or girl who makes your heart race and your pits sweat and gives you boners at the worst fucking times. You'll stick your tongue in his mouth or her mouth or their mouth, and let them reciprocate without stopping to consider where else their tongue has been, or whether they're giving you mouth herpes or

mono or leftover morsels of their tuna-salad sandwich.

When the bell finally rang for lunch, Ms. Faraci caught me at the door and pulled me aside. I stared at my shoes when Marcus passed. Adrian whispered, "Space Boy sucks alien dick," on his way out. To the best of my knowledge, slugs don't have dicks, which probably makes it difficult to masturbate. People have a lot of theories about why boys fall behind in school when they become teenagers, but all I'm saying is that I'd probably get a lot more schoolwork done if I didn't have a dick.

The two-story-tall front doors of Marcus's house were wide open and welcoming. Couples and crowds flowed in and out—their cheeks flushed, pleasantly drunk—stumbling and stoned or just laughing at some joke I'd never hear. I was worried as I entered that they'd see me and cringe, wonder who let Space Boy in, but no one noticed me. I snagged a beer from the kitchen and wandered through the house. I knew the rooms; the rooms knew me. Marcus and I had made out on that leather couch, I'd gone down on him under that baby grand piano, he'd chased me through the library and caught me on the stairs. We'd fucked on that counter and that floor and in that bathtub. After all we've done, I'm still his dirty secret.

Marcus fucks Henry. In the grammar of our relationship, I am the object.
I chugged my beer and grabbed another.

I stared at the illustrations of molecules in my book, admiring the way they fit together. They had a purpose, a destiny to fulfill. I had a button. My mind wandered, and I fantasized about the end of everything. About watching all the Marcus McCoy's of the world die horrible, bloody deaths. I'm not going to lie: it made me want to masturbate.

"Space Boy . . . Space Boy." Their sadistic giggling irritated me almost as much as the nickname.

"So we were making out, and my nose was running a little, but I had it in my mind that if I stopped kissing Jesse, he'd realize I was a loser and never want to kiss me again, so I ignored it and snogged on. I'm pretty sure we made out for hours, but when we turned on the lights, I screamed because Jesse's face was covered in blood."

"Gross!" Audrey ate her cookie as we sat outside the entrance of the mall.

"Turns out I'd had a bloody nose. It was smeared over both of our faces." We'd gotten six cookies to split, and they'd been gooey and delicious at first, but all the sugar was beginning to sour my stomach.

Eventually, Dad gave up trying to include me and left me behind. One Saturday morning I woke up and discovered his car gone, Charlie's bed empty. Then Charlie started high school and was too cool to go fishing anymore. He was too cool for everything. He divided his time between watching porn, masturbating, and trying to figure out ways to score liquor to impress his mouth-breather friends. I was convinced that high school transformed boys into porn-addicted,

chronic-masturbating alcoholics.

I was wrong. It turns them into something much worse.

"I won't." I couldn't believe Charlie was going to have a daughter. She wasn't a little parasite anymore; she was my niece. She wasn't going to grow up and go to high school and become a porn-addicted, chronic-masturbating alcoholic. She was going to have a mother and father who loved her and didn't slam doors. She was going to have an uncle who was sometimes abducted by aliens. She was going to grow up and grow old and fill her head with memories that time would never be able to steal from her.

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Fuck it.

I shut off my computer and flopped across my bed, letting my head fall backward so that the blood rushed to my brain. The pressure increased, and I counted the quickening *thud-thud-thud* of my heartbeat. I wondered how long I'd have to stay upside down before I passed out. How long after that before I'd die. I wondered what Jesse had thought about after he'd stepped off the edge of his desk and dangled on the end of the rope. Charlie has a buddy who works for Calypso Fire Rescue, and he said Jesse's knots were the best he'd ever seen. A perfect noose on one end, and a textbook clove hitch on the other. Once Jesse took the plunge, he couldn't have changed his mind even if he'd wanted to.

A sonogram with HAWTHORNE, ZOOEY printed across the bottom clung to the refrigerator door—held in place by a magnet from our favorite Chinese takeout joint. The picture looked like a miniature monochrome galaxy, teeming with stars and worlds and boundless potential. I took the sonogram to the kitchen table and tried to determine which part of the amorphous blob was my future niece or nephew. It was a game: find the fetus. Was it too early to know the sex? Probably. Not that it mattered. It wasn't even a baby yet. It was just a little parasite, and it would never be anything else.

Torpid from the booze and dizzy from hitting the rock, I tried to fend off Marcus, but he was yanking my jeans down around my knees. This was another slugger hallucination. Only an hour ago I was laughing with Audrey, I was seeing myself the way Diego saw me. Somewhere along the way I'd stumbled into this nightmare world where Marcus was on top of me, panting in my ear and telling me what

a fucking loser I was. How he was going to fuck Space Boy, and no one would believe me because no one believed loser space boys.

I pressed my head against the rock, digging it deeper into the cut on my scalp, clutching the pain, using it to drag me out of the fog. I elbowed Marcus in the face and scrambled to my feet, pulling up my pants and sprinting toward the flashing lights and laughter and nauseating smell of popcorn.

Marcus screamed my name. He tackled me by the bleachers, and I fell on my wrist. It bent back in a way wrists weren't supposed to bend, but I ate the pain, swallowed it down with blood, and became stronger. I kicked like an animal until I connected with something that made him howl. And then I ran again. I didn't look back this time either.

On the day I was born, photons from the star Gliese 832 began their journey toward Earth. I was little more than a squalling, wrinkled, shit-spewing monster when that light began its sixteen-year journey through the empty void of space to reach the empty void of Calypso, Florida, where I've spent my entire, empty void of a life. From Gliese 832's point of view, I am still a wrinkled, shit-spewing monster, only recently born. The farther we are from one another, the further we live in each other's pasts.

"Don't thank me." Charlie frowned at me with disgust. Growing up, he'd called me a botched abortion, shit stain, fucktard, faggot, asshat, dipshit, and Henrietta. But in all our years together he'd never looked at me like he was ashamed to be my brother. "Where the fuck were you, Henry?"

"Nowhere."

Charlie shoved me with so much force that I stumbled backward and fell onto the lawn. I threw my hands behind me as I fell, and landed on my ass. Dew soaked my boxers, grass stained my palms. I scrambled to my feet. "What the hell, Charlie?"

I had a pretty good idea what worse meant. When I found out that Jesse had hanged himself in his bedroom, I overheard my mom tell Nana that she couldn't imagine anything worse than finding her son's dead body, but I knew that wasn't true. Worse would be never finding me, never knowing what had happened, but I wouldn't have done that. Not to her, not to anyone.

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

Charlie shook his head. He could barely look at me. "No shit."

"Dad didn't abandon us," he said. "He abandoned you."

I struggled to breathe, to look Charlie in the eyes and call him a liar. Tell him he

was the worst fucking brother in the universe. That I would have been better off an only child. But I didn't say any of those things. I didn't say anything at all.

"He was so ashamed of what a pathetic loser you were that he couldn't stand being around you. Everyone you care about either runs away or kills themselves, and you think *I'm* a fuckup."

I shoved Charlie out of my room and slammed the door. I leaned against it, slid to the floor, and put my head in my hands. I wasn't crying because of what Charlie said; I was crying because, deep down, I knew he was right.

My arms were weak and my shoulders sore, but they weren't what hurt worst. Diego had made me happy these last few weeks, but it wasn't enough. I thought about Jesse looking down on me, seeing me with Diego. Teenage boys who are dead probably can't masturbate, and it made me sad to think about Jesse stuck in the afterlife, lonely, frustrated, and unable to get off. I loved him, and I just don't

"Seriously, it was the worst trip of my life. Every night we all had to lie still and pretend we couldn't hear Charlie polishing his rifle in the overhead bunk. I'm pretty confident he broke the world record for the most number of times a kid's masturbated while sharing breathing space with his parents, brother, and grandmother."

Twenty minutes later Marcus was pawing me under the bleachers while I kept a lookout for spiders and tried not to feel like a dirty cliché. He didn't even say hello when he saw me because he was too busy slipping his tongue into my mouth and putting his hands down my pants. It would have been sweet if I thought he were actually happy to see me rather than just plain horny.

My stomach churned, and I pushed Marcus away to avoid burping in his mouth. "Sorry, I skipped breakfast."

Marcus grabbed his crotch. "I've got something you could—"

brother, trash can, brother. "What kind of fucking psycho pisses on someone's homework?"

"You don't need to be a little bitch about it. Anyway, I told you to get out of the bathroom."

"Charlie! You pissed on my homework! In my bedroom!" Drops of urine had splattered out of the wastebasket and clung to the side of my desk. "I can't believe Zoey didn't have an abortion the moment she realized she was pregnant with your demon spawn!"

Before I could stop him—before I even knew what was happening—Charlie charged across the room and clamped his hand around my throat. He slammed me into the door, grinding my shoulder blades against the wood. "Don't you ever fucking talk about my kid like that." He didn't even yell. That was the scariest part. His voice was this calm, steady thrum. But he didn't need to yell for me to hear how deadly serious he was.

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Before you ask: no, the sluggers have never probed my anus. I'm fairly certain they

reserve that special treat for people who talk on their phones during movies, or text while driving.

importance of understanding atomic structure. As soon as she turned her back, I checked my phone. It was from Marcus, though he came up as All-Star Plumbers. His idea.

ALL-STAR PLUMBERS: bleachers. lunch. i'll bring the footlong.

It was risky meeting him while Audrey was playing detective, but I wanted to see him, especially since I'd turned down his offer for the weekend. Even when I hate Marcus, I miss him when we aren't together. He doesn't fill the yawning hole left by Jesse, but sometimes he makes it hurt slightly less.

I texted a quick reply and then stowed my phone.

Faraci was reviewing the different types of chemical reactions when the door at the front of the class swung open to admit a guy I didn't recognize. He was tall and dangerous with spiky black hair and a fuck-you grin. Lean muscles danced under his crisp shirt. He stood in the doorway, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops of his gray shorts until the entire class was staring at him.

"Someone called for a nude model?"

"Henry?"

"Hey, Ma."

Mom scrambled in her seat, waving her hands around. It took a second for me to realize she wasn't smoking a cigarette. "What're you doing sneaking up on me?"

"Are you high?"

"No." Silence. "Yes." Mom climbed out of the car, shamefaced. She was still wearing her waitressing uniform, and the puffy skin under her deep-set eyes sagged heavily. I snaked the joint from her and took a hit. The weed was cheap and burned my throat. "Henry!"

"I won't tell if you won't."

Mom chewed on that for a moment and then shrugged. We sat down on the driveway behind the car and passed the joint back and forth in silence. After a while Mom said, "I'm glad you're spending time with Audrey again. She makes you

smile."

"I wish you'd smile more."

"Things are hard right now."

It felt like I hadn't talked to my mom in a long time. She was always so angry or exhausted. "Why don't you try cooking again? You could easily snag a good job."

Rather than snapping at me like usual, she took a hit off the joint and held the smoke in for what felt like forever. When she exhaled, it was like she'd blown the last dusty remnants of her hope out with it. "I can't do that anymore, Henry."

Life is bullshit.

Consider your life for a moment. Think about all those little rituals that sustain you throughout your day—from the moment you wake up until that last, lonely midnight hour when you guzzle a gallon of NyQuil to drown out the persistent voice in your head. The one that whispers you should give up, give in, that tomorrow won't be better than today. Think about the absurdity of brushing your teeth, of

Marcus slammed me against the inside of the bathroom stall. The rickety partitions shook, their bolts rattled, and he invaded my personal space. The edge of the toilet-paper dispenser dug through my jeans and into the backs of my thighs, and he thrust his palm against my chest and leaned all his weight onto me. His cologne filled my nostrils with the scent of freshly mown grass. Marcus McCoy always smelled like summer.

I thought I heard the door and tried to check it out, but Marcus grabbed my jaw, silencing me. He dug his thumb into my cheek and eliminated the remaining space between our bodies, his kiss impatient and rough. His scruff scraped my lips, he ran his hands up my back and across my cheeks and down the front of my pants so quickly, I could hardly react.

"Cold hands!" I ducked out of Marcus's crushing hug to peek over the top of the stall door and make certain we were still alone. I buttoned my pants and adjusted myself.

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PROFANITY COUNT (and other sensitive words)

F*cking 27	*ssh at 1	Hook up 2
P*nsy 3	Beer 11	Attacked 22
F*ck 25	P*ssed 7	Assault, assaulted 4
*ss 17	Drunk 9	Jerking off 1
D*ck 9	Hand job 1	Naked 17
H*rpes 2	Blow jobs 1	Dead 53
Godd*amn 7	F*cked up 1	H*rny 3
M*sturb*ated 1	Pr*ck 5	Meth 1
Sh*t 32	Bullsh*tter 1	Abusive 1
B*llsh*t 16	B*tch 7	Vodka 5
An*al probe 2	B*lls 5	Stillbirth 1
F*ckmuppet 2	Jesus or Jesus Christ 11	Rape 3
D*ckless 1	Dismember 1	OxyContin 1
V*ginas 1	Suicide 18	
B*obs 1	Testicles 3	Chronic m*sturbating alcoholic 4
Dipsh*t 1	Noose 3	
F*ggot 1	Hanged 7	

RED FLAGS

Sexual Content (Rape, Masturbation, Pornography)

Extreme Violence

Violence

Language

Drugs, Drinking, Smoking

Suicidal tendencies/extreme depression

Encourages rape culture

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools