

The Poker Club: Julian's Private Scrapbook, Book 2

Eldot

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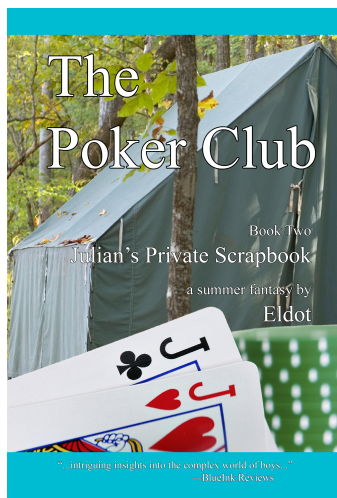
Second in Eldot's Julian's Private Scrapbook (a summer fantasy) series: *The Poker Club* details Julian's ongoing adventures during a two-week stay at Boy Scout Camp. Julian (like many teenage boys) lacks a father figure in his life, and has a mancrush on Mark, the scoutmaster who invites him to stay in his cabin at camp. Julian already knows Mark, they're neighbors back at home. Mark senses Julian's ache for the presence of a caring dad in his life, and is happy to provide that, as he can. Julian is an ingenue in the true sense of the word. He's guileless, gifted, sweet-natured, gung-ho and quick with a searching and curious mind. Like the older scouts, Mark feels very protective of Julian, and tries to acquaint him with the convivial (but sometimes risky) world of maleness, with its jovial mischief, code of behavior, and amped up libido that tortured us as adolescents. Mark tries to answer all Julian's questions about sex, with admirable frankness and discretion. Julian is somewhat overwhelmed by his feelings for Mark (it's all so much to process) but there's great warmth in their platonic connection.

Like the other scouts, Julian has his goals: learning new skills, earning merit badges, improving his swimming technique, depicting experiences in his artist's notebook. Julian's sophisticated technique is impressive and puts him much in demand. Other key characters include Danny, Tom, Nick, Geoff, Bruce and Sid. There are all kinds of activities to master. Archery, riflery, backpacking, planning skit night, to name a few. Lots of the boys enjoy swimming the cold, exhilarating lake, exploring underwater breathing, speed, rescue and distance. Like the YMCA and other all-male gatherings, they happily and casually swim naked, often without a second thought. This sets Julian's interests in motion, but no more so than other guys.

The Poker Game referenced in the title is a diversion for the older, more intrepid scouts (Tom, Geoff, Jack, Brian) where slyly introduced removal of clothing leads to avid sexual experimentation and fulfillment. This is 1962, and the world outside may not be quite so understanding of such behavior, so the guys must be discreet and careful. Eldot recognizes that teenage boys (consider *Spring Awakening*, *The Last Picture Show*) have an impetuous, profoundly intense need to actualize the

rush of male hormones that runs through their veins. Not all the guys are headed for a life of same-gender coupling, but they want to express their manhood, and enjoy each other's company, in a zillion different ways. They are giddy, game and secretive, but never disrespectful or brutal. They are kind and gradual, never foisting themselves. Eldot imbues these passages with a kind of celebratory energy, while avoiding hyperbole. Julian gladly helps his friend Danny by rubbing lotion on his painful, sunburned "buns". What follows is spontaneous, friendly, and mutually pleasurable.

I struggle to explain the balancing act that Eldot manages in Julian's Private Scrapbook series. Eroticism between guys is a part of the tapestry, to be sure. But by creating a rich, layered context of male companionship and clustering, it takes on a different hue. Eldot confides the goofy, ridiculous, sweet, hilarious, imperative and earnest world of boy scout camp with its all-male milieu. Julian's previous lack of closeness with other boys serves as a springboard for discovering what it means to connect and bond. Male Fart Culture, silly skits, learning to shoot, dive, cook for the other guys, it's all in there. There's a kind of spirited, military feel, with none of the negative implications that so often accompany that experience. Erotic enjoyment is described in plain, forthright, unflinching language that is neither inflated or suffused with salacious intent. What makes *The Poker Club* so effective is Eldot's mastery at evincing that sexuality is simply one aspect of a vast, full, contented life. He convincingly shares the rowdy, raucous joys of maleness, in all its boisterous and sometimes nuanced mystery.



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