

Barnes, John. **Tales of the Madman Underground** p.532

Recommended for Grades 10-12

Realistic Fiction

As he begins his senior year of high school, Karl Shoemaker has one thing on his mind; his plan to become “normal”. The most important aspect of his plan was to eradicate his membership in the school’s teen therapy group, the Madman Underground. Strategic as his scheme may be, it is put to a grinding halt when his fellow Madmen need him. Never one to abandon a friend, Karl spends the next five days establishing a friendship with the new girl at school, re-establishing an old friendship, and sorting out the problem that is his drunken mother – who is constantly stealing the money he earns from his five jobs.

Set in 1973 and directed mostly towards a more mature, high school audience, the novel is proof that life as a teenager has never been easy. While not every teen can relate to every situation Karl is presented with, his wanting to be “normal” is extraordinarily common. It is easy for an adolescent to connect with the characters’ awkwardness and insecurities, and make their victories all the more enjoyable for the reader. Though it is clear that life has not been an easy ride for Karl, there is an underlying message of hope throughout the story. He accepts that there are some things he cannot change – such as the physical and psychological bullying the Madmen are condemned to by their peers and his mother’s reckless behavior – and learns to forgive and move forward.

-Tina