

ARTS & CULTURE / BOOKS

New Novel Tackles Emotional Accounts of Addiction

“Young Firecrackers” explodes with five brutally real, raw, and honest accounts of drug addiction.

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(From left) Artie Bernstein, Ryan Bernstein, and Nina Bernstein.

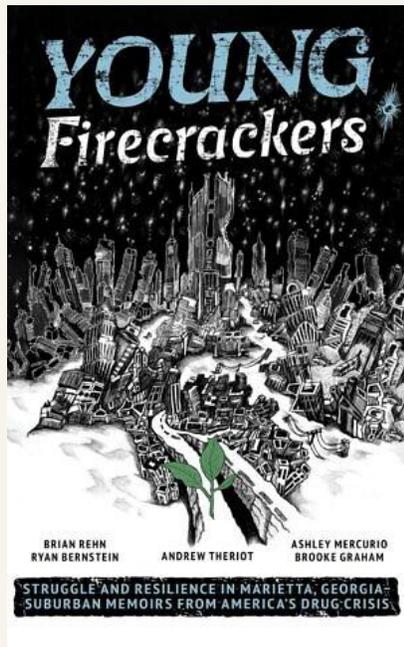
“Young Firecrackers” is an apropos title for this book as it explodes with five brutally real, raw and honest accounts of drug addiction impacting these five authors from East Cobb in Marietta: Brian Rehn, Ryan Bernstein, Andrew Theriot, Ashley Mercurio, and Brooke Graham, and its effect on not only these individuals, but also on their families and friends. This writer admires the courage of these individuals as they survived to recount their stories of addiction along with all the deaths they experienced along the way.

East Cobb, which we often hear termed as “East Snob”, is an affluent Marietta suburb having some of the best schools in Georgia like Walton High School, Pope High School, and Lassiter High School. It is a highly sought after suburb of Atlanta which carries a mantra of privilege and status. Who could imagine a prevalent opioid and heroin drug addiction problem in this prosperous community and at these schools? As the book outlines, this was a major problem in the mid-1990s which did not discriminate based on one’s race, religion or creed; it impacted everyone it could get its selfish hands on. It was the devil in disguise and once it got its grip on you, it didn’t let go.

Can you imagine as a parent getting a call that your child has overdosed or died from an overdose? Can you fathom the unimaginable pain and suffering these parents and their children endured? Many families, this writer included, move to East Cobb so their children can attend the best schools available to them.

The five stories in this book will choke you with emotion and tug at your heart. It will bring tears to your eyes as you read about the torment and suffering these kids and their parents went through as their drug addiction took total

control over them.



"Young Firecrackers" details five raw and emotional accounts of drug addiction.

On the positive, these are also stories of resilience, faith, perseverance, hope, and triumph coupled with the unconditional love and support of their families helping their children overcome their addiction to now live a clean and productive life.

Regarding one of the authors, Ryan Bernstein, Atlanta Jewish Times ran a story in October 2005 called, "Shooting So High, Sinking So Low," that outlined the recovery Bernstein made through a 12-step rehab program at HaDerech in Israel, which his sister, Kerri, found for him as a last resort to getting clean. Bernstein said he was on the tail end of a cocaine-induced minor heart attack and was on the streets. Nobody wanted anything to do with him anymore. Israel was kind of the last straw. His sister was like, "Well, if you want your family and your life, you're going to go here."

In Israel, he had no access to his passport or wallet so there was no escape. Despite going to Israel and coming back clean from addiction, it was just another speed bump in his overall recovery journey. Unfortunately, within two months of

returning home to East Cobb, Bernstein was addicted again. Twenty years later, he is now able to share his ultimate recovery journey to overcome his addiction once and for all.

Bernstein and his family graciously welcomed the opportunity for the AJT to interview them about the book and their personal journey. They felt the importance of sharing these stories with a wide audience so hopefully others would not have to endure what they struggled through.

The AJT asked Ryan how they came up with the title of the book, "Young Firecrackers." He explained the title originated from a song, "Fine Young Firecrackers," by a band called Conditions, a rock band from Richmond, Va. When his friend, Gary, died from an overdose in 2009, the band played at a house show after his funeral, a party in honor of Gary. When the book project was started in 2020, they wanted something related to the band and chose "Young Firecrackers" from their song. Today, the song can be found on Spotify (<https://open.spotify.com/album/1kdBAKcVhdTE9qxzNzh5Md?si=XnfzohYgROiAGVzPiQilWg>).

Bernstein mentioned it was not really hard to write. He said, "It's not like I had to revisit it, it's still there. It's almost like every day I find new ways to grow and make my peace with the past. The only struggle was trying to remember all the details. There was no embellishing, and careful attention was paid to accuracy."

Bernstein managed to escape from the rehab centers he entered in the United States mentioning that "geographic location doesn't prevent addiction; it's more about internal insecurities. The mindset and personal insecurities were the main factors that kept perpetuating the addiction over the years."

Being in and out of jail and rehab centers didn't really change anything until the threat of losing his most precious thing, his son, Abel James Bernstein. It was the one thing in life that was Ryan's, and he didn't want to lose it. As far as hitting rock bottom, every speed bump along the way was what he thought was rock bottom until the next time. Rock bottom is subjective and can vary from person to person.

The AJT asked Nina and Artie Bernstein, Ryan's parents, as a parent looking back, did they think this was preventable knowing what they know now? They didn't think it was. Artie said, "It's just the luck of the draw and who you might be hanging out with at the time."

If you have an addictive type of personality, which Ryan admitted to having, that also contributes to the problem. After Ryan's friend, Justin died, Nina was told by Justin's mother that Ryan and all the boys were doing Oxycontin to

