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Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son: A Memoir of Growing Up, Coming Out, and Changing America's Schools

By Kevin Jennings



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Long before Kevin Jennings began advocating to end anti-LGBT bias in schools, he was a victim of it. In *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son*, Jennings traces the roots of his activism to his elementary school days in the conservative South, where "faggot" became more familiar to him than his own name. *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son* is that rare memoir that is both a riveting personal story and an inside account of a critical chapter in our recent history. Creating safe schools for all youth is now a central part of the progressive agenda in American education—and Kevin Jennings is at the forefront of that fight. *Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son* earned an A- in *Entertainment Weekly*, was featured in *Salon* and *The Advocate*, and was called "a great read" by *People*.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

This rags-to-riches story, about growing up poor and eventually reaching Harvard has bite and pathos. The youngest son of a born-again Southern Baptist preacher originally from Massachusetts, and a mother from Appalachian Tennessee, Jennings led an itinerant youth among trailer parks in Southern towns where his dad would try to find work. The boy couldn't make his father proud on the football field, and already he had learned that "being a real man meant taking advantage of anyone smaller or weaker than you." With his father's abrupt death when Jennings was eight, he became a "mama's boy," introverted, brainy and overweight, and ridden by guilt at his incipient homosexuality. Supported by his scarcely educated mother, who became the first woman manager at McDonald's, Jennings excelled in school and on the debate team and was accepted to Harvard by 1981. Jennings became a high-school teacher, at Concord Academy among others, agonizing over the decision to out himself; he promoted the creation of GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) to protect students from the kind of harassment he experienced firsthand. When his national crusade brought him back home to speak at the same Winston-Salem school system where his "young soul had almost been crushed," Jennings writes of his journey with graciousness and candor. (*Aug.*) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

When hospitalized in 1966 with whooping cough--a consequence of his family's extreme poverty, which excluded vaccinations, insurance, and even a doctor until the three-year-old's fever exceeded 102 degrees--Jennings almost died. Buoyed by his Appalachian mother's steel will, he returned to the family's two-bedroom trailer and recovered, but fighting for life left him feeling different and vulnerable, and his mother overprotective. Hence, he became a mama's boy. As for his fundamentalist--preacher dad, he cared only about God and sports, worked construction jobs--and dropped dead at Jennings' eighth-birthday party. He grew up gay with athletic brothers in a sports-mad family ("a white-trash version of the Kennedys") amid a culture that forbade homosexuality. After 12 years "of isolation and sadness" in public schools, he went to Harvard on a scholarship and discovered new freedoms, but he re-closeted himself when he went home to teach. After two years, he left, marched with his partner for gay rights in 1987, and eventually spearheaded efforts to make schools safer for gay kids. A refreshingly readable memoir. *Whitney Scott*
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Review

Horatio Alger meets Dorothy Allison in this debut memoir about growing up and coming out . . . Generous and illuminating. —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Not graphic or preachy, this book belongs in any high school that has students struggling with issues of identity and gender!" —Terri Lent (AASL), Patrick Henry High School, Ashland, VA

"Jennings, founder of GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network, recounts his experiences with bigotry, fear, strength and inspiration within his immediate family, among school peers and in society in general. This work is an engaging account of a boy conflicted who goes on to lend vital support to other young people across the country."—Carla Bauman-Franks (PLA), Allen County Public Library, Fort Wayne, IN

Users Review

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