



# Band Fags!

*Frank Anthony Polito*

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## **Band Fags!** Frank Anthony Polito

"Ever since I first heard that Lionel Richie and Diana Ross song, 'Endless Love,' all I've wanted is to find The One. Someone to love. Who will love me back." September, 1982. John Cougar's "Jack and Diane" is on endless radio rotation, and Dallas and Dynasty rule the ratings. Jack Paterno is a straight-A student living in the Detroit suburb of Hazel Park, with his own Atari 5200, a Beta VCR, and everything a seventh-grader could ask for. The only thing he has in common with foul-mouthed Brad Dayton, who lives on the gritty south side near 8 Mile, is that both are in Varsity Band. Or maybe that's not the only thing. Because Jack is discovering that while hanging around with girls in elementary school was perfectly acceptable, having lots of girl friends (as opposed to girlfriends) now is getting him and Brad labeled as Band Fags. And Jack is no fag. Is he?

As Jack and Brad make their way through junior high and then through Hazel Park High School, their friendship grows deeper and more complicated. From stealing furtive glances at *Playgirl* to discussing which celebrities might be like that, from navigating school cliques to dealing with crushes on girls and guys alike, Jack is trying to figure out who and what he is. He wants to find real, endless love, but he also wants to be popular and "normal." But, as Brad points out, this is real life--not a John Hughes movie. And sooner or later, Jack will have to choose.

Filled with biting wit and pitch-perfect observations, *Band Fags* is an exhilarating novel about lust and love, about the friendships that define and sometimes confine us, and about coming of age and coming to terms with the end of innocence and the beginning of something terrifying, thrilling, and completely unpredictable.

## **Advance praise for Band Fags!**

"For those of us who came of age in the 80s, reading Frank Anthony Polito's novel is like being teleported back to high school. Filled with pop culture references that will have you saying, 'I remember that!', 'this is a love letter to a time when happiness was a pair of Calvin Klein jeans, and every heartbreak could be fixed by listening to your Bonnie Tyler or REO Speedwagon albums. Most important, though, it is a portrait of a friendship between two boys struggling to find themselves without losing each other.'--Michael Thomas Ford, author of *Last Summer*

"With the Motor City running on empty in Reagan's America, Frank Anthony Polito's characters dance their mystery dance of teenage longing as if Motown never left for California. Sexy, funny, and wiser than it wants to be, *Band Fags!* pulses with a ragged beauty and bounces to its beat. I give it a 98.6." --Thorn Kief Hillsbery, author of *What We Do Is Secret*

"More than just a novel, *Band Fags!* is a virtual time machine that transports you smack dab into the cheesy heart of the 80's. It's like a queer *Wonder Years* as it follows Brad and Jack's memorable journey through high school hell. Screamingly funny, surprisingly charming and, ultimately, truly moving, it's a fresh take on the importance of friendship during the worst/best years of your life." --Brian Sloan, *A Really Nice Prom Mess and Tale of Two Summers*

"A consistently hilarious story of the best-friendship we all seem to have had, set in a time we can never seem to forget -- the totally awesome '80s -- *Band Fags!* never misses a beat in its affectionate, moment-by-

moment chronicling of the complicated journey we take from cradle to closet to what lies beyond." --  
Matthew Rettenmund, author of *Boy Culture*

"*Band Fags!* is like the gay teen flick John Hughes never got around to making. Let's face it, there's a Band Fag in all of us and Frank Anthony Polito has his on speed dial. This book is a sweet, funny, deeply felt valentine to the wonder/horror of coming of age in the 1980's. You might just pee your parachute pants." --  
Den

## Band Fags! Details

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# From Reader Review Band Fags! for online ebook

## Jeff Erno says

When I first began reading this book, I honestly was not too impressed. Actually, I was frustrated and annoyed by the author's writing style. For the first half of the book every paragraph was riddled with incomplete sentences. He also seemed to ignore literally every grammatical rule in the book. I read his biography and discovered he has a Master's degree in dramatic writing. Go figure. Well, I think it was the fact that I related so well to the pop culture from the 80's and also possibly because I live in Michigan very close to where the story is set, that I forced myself to continue reading.

Interestingly, the author's writing style seemed to mature along with the central character. The conclusion I've drawn was that his poor grammar was a deliberate attempt to sound authentic and conversational. I'm not sure it worked for me, but setting that aside, I have to admit that I've been deeply moved by this touching story.

Jack Paterno is a seventh-grade literary geek who is also muscally inclined. He's a member of his school's band, and the close friendships he develops during his junior high and high school years all center around his involvement in band. He and his fellow band members are disparagingly referred to as "band fags".

As Jack approaches and eventually dives right into puberty, a realization starts to dawn upon him. He begins questioning his identity, and these questions are quite alarming to him. He recalls in vivid detail the way he always played girl-type games with his female friends and cousins when he was young. He remembers crushes he's had on other boys. He thinks it might be weird that he's obsessed with soap operas and sappy romantic movies. Worst of all though, he fears that the fact he finds other guys attractive might make him "that way". He's afraid he might be a real fag, not just a band fag.

Jack's best friend is a boy named Brad, and the two are the same age. Brad is similar to Jack in that he's also in band, and he's also "that way". The story is definitely a coming-out and coming-of-age-story, but more significantly it is a story about this enduring friendship. It is about fear, betrayal, passion, and forgiveness. It is about enduring love. The relationship that these two central characters develop is powerful and deeply moving.

During part of the book I found myself not liking Jack too much. In fact, I sort of wanted to slam it closed and toss it in the trash. I found him to be ego-centric and shallow. I was extremely offended by some of the elitist remarks he made, for example stating that his parents were simple people because they worked in a supermarket. When he abandoned his friends in an attempt to gain popularity from the "in" crowd, I wanted to smack him.

I'm not sure if the book is at all auto-biographical, but if so, I'm impressed with the author's willingness to expose himself this way. Ultimately, my opinion changed about the protagonist, and I actually cried near the end.

Perhaps the story contained more details than it needed. Maybe the narrator tended to drone on a bit when he could have been advancing the story. Sometimes he seemed to get distracted and began talking about off-topic subjects which caused some confusion. In spite of this, though, I really enjoyed the narration. I sort of felt as if that is exactly the way a real-life Jack Paterno would talk if he were sitting in my living room carrying on a conversation with me. I also loved the way his detailed descriptions allowed me to paint clear

mental pictures of the setting and the characters.

I think that although the character Jack Paterno was shallow for much of the story, the book itself was amazingly deep, and I'm certain it's going to stick with me for a long time. It really makes me want to pick up the phone and call all the people I've known throughout my life just to remind them how much I love them.

Thanks Frank Polito for a great read. Thanks for sharing your talent. Thanks for being an out and proud Band Fag! If I were a girl, I'd think you're totally hot!!

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## **Elisa Rolle says**

Band Fags! (and actually being a Band Fag doesn't mean you are gay, it means you are one of those kids who tags along with all the other kids in the high school band, and usually they are not exactly the most popular kids in the school...) is probably the first "real" coming of age novel I have read; it's centred around Brad and Jack, band fags and best friends all through-out high school, and even if the external reader can easily see that both of them are gay, they don't know, or at least Jack doesn't know or better doesn't want to know.

The novel is a long run along with Brad and Jack in the middle of the '80, with all the icons of that time, soap-operas, movies, music and glossy magazines. It was somewhat a fake world, but to the eyes of young Jack that was the real thing. Jack who is in love with a soap-opera soubrette, an imaginary girlfriend he considers real and for this reason tries to replace in his real life with similar look-alikes. Jack who always played girl games, who has always preferred to tag along his girl best friends and who, when Brad comes into the picture, finds finally the perfect best friend: Brad likes soap-operas and fashion, and Brad understands Jack perfectly.

But while Jack growing up is trying to find the perfect girlfriend, all the time trying also to hide his secret fantasies for various young and hot same age boys, Brad never once shows any real interest for girls; again there is an obvious reason, and again it's not that Brad is trying to hide it, by Jack doesn't want to know, doesn't want to see. When finally Brad finds the courage to "come out" (i.e. to force Jack to see the plain truth), the tragedy fall down upon them, a tragedy that is as big as few are their years; again to an external reader everything is simple, why Jack cannot admit he is gay? Why is he being so mean to Brad, his best friend, the only guy who has always understood him and more than once helped him? The reason is as the same simple: they are teenagers, they are not "little men" with a adult mind, and they are behaving like kids, as they should.

What I want to highlight is that, even if Jack is gay, he is also "in-the-making": he is still trying to understand himself, to put together all the pieces of his existence, and no adult, or best friend, can rush this process; they can encourage him, support him, like Brad and also Jack's mother do, but he has to arrive to the final solution of the puzzle of his youth alone, and conscious of his evolution. Maybe Jack is a little slower than other teenagers, than Brad, maybe the reader will think "but how you cannot understand yourself, when we have understood everything already?", but this is Jack's life, not ours, not Brad; even if Brad is an important part of that life.

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/0758222653/?...>

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## **David Robeano says**

Really enjoyed it - same time period as my coming of age, and filled with great references from that time. Ending was surprisingly disappointing though, just, kind of ended.

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## **Geoffrey says**

I may be a little biased. I was born in suburbs of Detroit in which this book is set, I'm 3-years older than the main character, I really really didn't want to be gay in high school and I was a band fag.

All disclaimers aside, this is a well written coming of age story set in the mid-80's in suburban Michigan. The two main characters, Jack and Brad, are best friends throughout the story as only school age friends can be - Sometimes they are inseparable, sometimes they fight and sometimes they flirt with intimacy. They both come to terms with being gay in an era that was not all that welcoming to gay people. And they do it in very different ways but in the end are still friends.

The book is written in a voice that is youthful, funny and with the correct slang as extra flavor.

I bought it as a recommendation off my kindle after thinking, from the cover and the title, that it was just another silly coming of age novel by yet another gay guy. And it is all that but it's much more. It's well written, it's not preachy and it's really a lot of fun.

Kinda makes me want to look up some of my old friends from high school.

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## **Andrea says**

A coming-of-age story set in Detroit during the 80s, the same time I came of age, so I can relate. I grew up in NYC - not the same, but there are big-city parallels that are easy to draw. The main character and narrator, Jack, just made sense to me. His train of thought was easy to follow and, while I never questioned my own sexuality, I could understand his process. I related to his struggle to figure out where he fit in. Which group do I really belong to? Am I a nerd? Part of the "in" crowd? Who is my best friend? (Because of course you have to choose - you can't have two people you love equally!) Am I a gay or straight? (My version was "Am I a prude or a slut?" - because there is no middle ground, of course). How far am I willing to go to prove that I'm on the right side of the cool/not cool line? It all sounded so familiar to me.

I nodded and grinned as Jack and his best friend, Brad, rode the waves of their relationship - up and down, up and down - over many years. It reminds me a bit of my relationship with my best friend. Who are we to each other? Schoolmates? Casual acquaintances? Friends? More?

The way the smallest events changed Jack's life also had a familiar ring to it.

I loved this book, front to back. I will be reading it again, count on it.

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## **Sarah says**

I interlibrary loaned this adult coming-of-age story from Urbana and have to admit I giggled a little bit. It's the early 1980s and what Jack Paterno goes through, I remember. He plays Atari, rolls his jeans in junior high, and wore parachute pants to school. But Jack is a little different. Maybe. He's not sure. He's active in band, and good at it, and therefore he gets called the book title. But is he gay? He has a girlfriend all through junior high. And a lot of high school. He has dates to school dances and everything. But he and his best friend Brad grow apart when Brad announces his homosexuality. Jack isn't sure he wants to be labeled "that." Or does he?

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## **Ric Faust says**

Wow...I feel like I lived this story. Though I didn't come out until I was in my 20's, and these boys are in high school, I was a "Band Fag" playing, clarinet, sax, oboe, and piano and I was in Drama, during the 80's. Every song back then had a meaning so that each title is the name of an 80's song is so fitting. (Even today, my iPod is mostly 80's music).

If you've read the other reviews you know that it's about two boys growing up in the 80's and trying to determine if they in fact are, or are not, gay. The inner turmoil they go through and even the stress on their friendship since one is more "flamboyant" than the other is pretty realistic. Back then I had a lot of friends who were girls, but no girlfriends and the same can be said for these two. The story isn't only for someone who grew up gay, but anyone who understands the complexities of high school, maybe was an outsider, and especially those who remember the 80's or at least still enjoy the 80's.

For me, because it resonated so closely with my growing up, I won't be donating it to the library. It's been put aside to read again at a later date.

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## **BookChic Club says**

Told over the course of 6 years, though mainly just the high school years, *Band Fags!* is a fast, witty, and so true tale of finding oneself. The book itself takes place in the '80s, specifically 1982-1988, but the main message and core of the novel is timeless and goes beyond the '80s references. Even if you don't necessarily get all the references (much like myself, though they are usually accompanied with an explanation), Jack's journey is one that anyone can follow along and really get into. I absolutely loved reading this book, though I did have some slight problems with it. The first was a stylistic choice (as shown in one of the questions in the accompanying Reading Guide) of repeating certain words and phrases, which got on my nerves a bit while reading the book; the second was some unnecessary explanations that weren't really needed at all, some of which involved the implications of the word "What?" being said, even though the reader could easily figure out what was meant by it. The final one was the ending, but that's just my own personal problem—I was hoping for a different ending for Jack and it didn't happen. The ending was still good, but it wasn't what I had been expecting, which may have been the author's intent to begin with. Other than those things, it is still a wonderful book, though more for older teens than younger ones because of the language and some of the content talked about.

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### **Madison Parker says**

For someone who went to high school in the 80's, this was a fun trip down memory lane. This book is filled with awesome pop culture references. My favorite was the Swatch watch. Good times. :-) I also really liked the unique writing style.

The main character, Jack, longs for but never really finds love. Not love-love anyway, just the love of his friends. And who wants to hook up with their friends? (Gross!) Okay, that was my poor attempt to copy the writing style, lol.

This is a story of self-discovery and friendship, told from a teenager's point of view.

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### **Amy P. says**

I want my children to read this and my children's children so one day they will know the history of the 80's. This book is amazing! If you grew up in the 80's you will especially appreciate this book, and if you didn't...you will still appreciate this book.

As "Band Fag" myself I can definitely relate to this story. Unlike Jack the main character, I could only hack band my freshman year before I gave up. As a fag going through self-discovery in high school, I can relate to Jack's struggles, although just our few years difference in age made it a little easier for me a few years later (and in So. Cal.). I am amazed with the teen angst, guilt of exploration of one's sexuality, and the seriousness, joys, and annoyance that Polito captures in this book. Not only is this an awesome story, it is very well written.

Special props out to Polito for really exploring the love of Days of Our Lives. What I wouldn't have done to be Jack's friend in high school! I probably liked this book due to personal recognition with the main character, but I think this is also just a wonderful piece of queer YA fiction that is deserving of a read.

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### **Mark Jordan says**

This book is a valentine to the 1980s, loaded with pop culture references and endless asides. I like that the central story of the book is about the ups and downs of two friends, but the two potential problems for some readers are 1) the amount of non-essential side references (which is staggering), and 2) the fact that the main character, Jack, does everything he can to make one want to smack him. Granted, coming to terms with one's sexuality is a difficult thing for some people, but Jack is surely an epic case. He manages to alienate almost everyone around him without ever quite understanding that his unease with himself is why he's not more popular. But as someone who graduated the same year, 1988, I can certainly understand why Jack is so fearful of being perceived as "like that" in the homophobic halls of a Midwest school. Since he does begin (just barely!) to accept himself in the closing pages of the book, I have to rank this discursive and probably heavily autobiographical novel at least three stars. But I almost abandoned it early on, as Polito does all-too-good a job making the narrator sound like an annoying teenager in the grades 7 through 9 part of the book, and only slightly less so later. As other reviewers have noted, there is some deepening halfway in, though



Jack remains a frustrating guy who will go to inordinate lengths to run from the truth of who he is. Ultimately, I would have liked this story a lot more if Jack just dealt with the obvious truth and got on with his life. It's hard to be sympathetic to someone who is delusional, unless the narrative takes you so deep inside the character that you can't help but agree that the character has no other choice. That doesn't happen here, because even Jack agrees that he's being a jerk... and then he continues to be a jerk. This book does, however, chronicle a real point of view. I'm sure this is exactly what growing up gay in the 1980s was for a lot of people, and for many it will be a nostalgic trip down memory lane with the loads of pop culture references. If, like me, you never felt at home in the very time you grew up in, you might find the indulgence of this book a bit trying.

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## **Paul Decker says**

Find this review and more at [The AP Book Club](#)

This book wasn't exactly what I expected. I had just finished reading *Geography Club*, which was a very fast read, and I was looking for more LGBT coming-of-age high school stories. This novel takes place over 6 years, following the protagonist from middle school to high school. Throughout the book, the reader is given an up close and personal view of the protagonist's thoughts and opinions. The characters were very well written. Each character felt like a real person. I liked how the characters changed throughout the 6 years, as well. There were so many characters in this book, too, that it felt like a real person was telling you his life story. When some characters were brought up later in the book I had to think back about what they had done in past years.

At first, this book is overwhelming and slightly off putting because of the vast amount of information, but once I got into it and knew the characters I was hooked. Some of the scenes have so much raw emotion. The inner thoughts of the protagonist really add to the realness of these scenes.

There are a lot of 80's pop culture references. I was born in 1988. The protagonist graduates high school in 1988. So, I didn't know some of the references. But, I googled a lot of them to understand what the characters were talking about and it really added to the story. I liked the way they were used. It made the book feel even more autobiographical. One reference I didn't get was the use of "dah-dah, dah-dah". At one point I thought it might be the *Jaws* song, but I am still unsure. I'm looking forward to reading *Polito's Lost* in the 90's because I won't need as much google assistance.

Overall, I really enjoyed this book. I want to read *Drama Queens!* eventually, but I think I'll have to be in the right mood for it. This is an extensive novel, that is definitely worth a read. If you were in high school in the late 80's, you will probably enjoy this book even more. I give it a 4/5.

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## **Christopher says**

This was great blast to the past for me...as I grew up and went to high school in the exact same years as this story takes place. The book was kind of the same from beginning to end; but still an enjoyable read especially if you're not really looking for a solid plot, just a fun moment in time.

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## **Ryan says**

From most of the reviews of "Band Fags!" I've read it seems like the two things that readers comment on are High School Band and the 80s. While both are a part of the book, the novel is so much more. This novel is about finding yourself and the friendships you gain and lose along the way. It examines the complexities of relationships in the turbulent high school years.

This is the coming-of-age and coming-out story of a high school "band fag" who grew up with his best friend in the suburbs of Detroit in the 80s. The plot tracks a typical high school experience from year-to-year. The novel examines characters that might be gay, don't want to be gay, think that they may be gay, are gay-for-a-day, and every other way a kid can question his sexuality. High school for many is an isolating and confusing time for many teens as brilliantly illustrated by the novel. "Band fags" Jack and Brad try to avoid the negative aspects of those years and while trying to navigate through their own issues and problems. A cast of interesting characters unite and divide equally the two friends as they try to figure out which are "like that" and which are not. The story ranges from sweet and touching to heartbreaking and hilarious. The novel is easy to read as it is told from the perspective of a high school boy who is writing exactly what he's thinking at the time.

This book will appeal to many different readers and will disappoint few. Anyone who was raised in the 80s will enjoy all the 80s references. Anyone in high school band will remember being called a "band fag" whether gay or not. Anyone from the Detroit area will know exactly all the places the author describes. Anyone who has been through high school will understand exactly what Jack goes through in this novel.

I recommend this book for anyone who wants to read a good, interesting book that drags you in and keeps you there.

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## **Scott says**

A fun, quick book. Being a Band Fag myself, I saw a lot of my own experiences in the lead character. But I have to say, for being titled "Band Fags!", there seemed to be very little about being in the band.

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