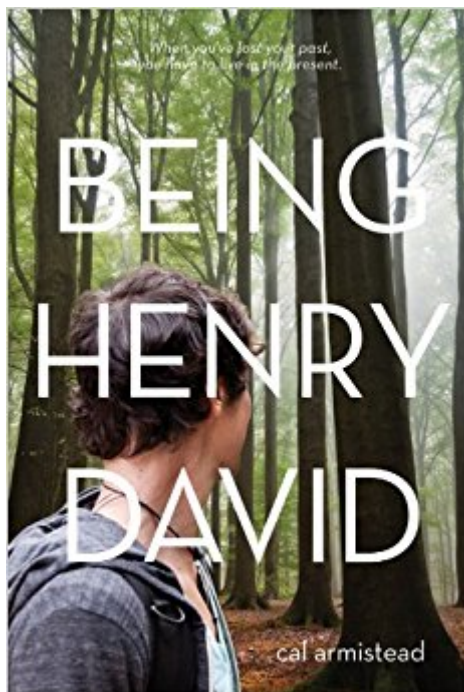


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# Being Henry David



## Synopsis

Seventeen-year-old Hank has found himself at Penn Station in New York City with no memory of anything; who he is, where he came from, why he's running away. His only possession is a worn copy of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau. And so he becomes Henry David; and takes first to the streets, and then to the only destination he can think of; Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Cal Armistead's remarkable debut novel about a teen in search of himself. As Hank begins to piece together recollections from his past he realizes that the only way he can discover his present is to face up to the realities of his grievous memories. He must come to terms with the tragedy of his past to stop running and find his way home.

## Book Information

Paperback: 312 pages

Publisher: Albert Whitman & Company (March 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807506168

ISBN-13: 978-0807506165

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 106 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #414,416 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #89 in Books > Teens >

Literature & Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Runaways #435 in Books > Teens > Literature

& Fiction > Social & Family Issues > Self Esteem & Reliance #1187 in Books > Teens >

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## Customer Reviews

Gr 10 Up-A boy wakes up in Penn Station, remembering nothing. He guesses that he's about 17, he has a head injury, and he is carrying only 10 dollars. Near at hand is a copy of *Walden*, so for want of anything better he calls himself Henry David (Hank). He heads to Concord, Massachusetts, to find, he hopes, some clues at Walden Pond. As his memories slowly return, he remembers who he was; as he copes with the memories, he discovers who he is and can be. The quiet mystery of Hank's past is the central plot point, but the focus is more on the relationships he builds and his efforts to be a good person and make up for past misdeeds-whatever they may have been. Thematic elements from Thoreau are subtly deployed, planting the suggestion that teens pick up

Walden. Introspective high schoolers will appreciate this enigmatic coming-of-age story. -Brandy Danner, Wilmington Memorial Library, MA (c) Copyright 2011. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

A boy wakes up on the floor of Penn Station with an aching head and a copy of *Walden* in his hand; beyond that, he knows nothing—not his name, not his family, and certainly not how he ended up there. The first things he remembers, surprisingly, are long passages of *Walden*, so he dubs himself “Henry David,” or Hank, as he comes to be known, sensing that Thoreau’s book contains some clues to his real identity. The next few days are a jumble of experiences, and throughout it all, a “beast” in Hank’s head keeps up a furious attack against the return of his memory. Only when his memory begins to resurface does Hank realize that the beast has been protecting him from a terrible truth. Frequent passages from *Walden* are a pleasing complement to the relentless tensions of Hank’s situation, as is the romance when Hank and a girl click through their mutual love of music. Think James Dashner’s *Maze Runner* series meets *High School Musical*: an engaging and unique book. Grades 9-12. --Diane Colson

A teen boy wakes up in Penn Station with absolutely no memory of who he is or how he came to be at the station. The only possible clue to his identity is a worn copy of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau lying next to him when he awakes. Not long after coming to, mystery boy meets two homeless youths, Jack and Nessa, who give him some company while he tries to get his bearings. Not knowing what other moniker to give himself, and inspired by the copy of *Walden* he continues to keep with him, our narrator at first decides to go by Henry David but then shortens it to “Hank”. Unfortunately for Hank, his new association with Jack unexpectedly gets him involved in a soured drug deal. Jack, Nessa and Hank realize they all need to split up for their own safety and survival. Hank’s choice is to travel to Concord, Massachusetts, the location of the Walden Pond that inspired Thoreau’s most famous work. Hank starts to suspect his memories are frozen because of something horrible he might have done, so while he half hopes to have his memory return, he also toys with the idea of just starting all over in Concord with a new identity altogether. It wasn’t too long ago that I read Thoreau’s *Walden*, so I was curious to see how a sort of YA mystery / thriller might be written around a piece of naturalist classic literature. For a debut novel, I found this to be an impressive entrance for Cal Armistead (threw me to later find out the author is female, I initially just assumed Cal was short for Calvin or something). There are quite a few mystery-thriller type stories

starting amnesia patients on the market these days, and while this one doesn't always offer up the most tense plot -- there was a part there in the middle that got a little slow for me -- it made for a fun time reading how Hank put the pieces of his history together, little by little. As the memories trickle in, the people Hank interacts with -- whether it be his street friends Jack & Nessa; the HS janitor in Concord, Sophie; high school student Hailey; or the Harley-riding research librarian, Michael -- each one in their roles plays an important part in unlocking Hank's mind. I especially liked the almost father-like bond Hank develops with Michael. My one big gripe with the story is that the way Hank interacts with Hailey sometimes struck me as sounding much more middle-grade or jr high rather than someone in their late teens, on the cusp of adulthood, as Hank is described as being. So while the tension level of the plot might be more of the ebb & flow variety rather than more steady, the novel's end was definitely satisfying for me and, I thought, stayed true to the spirit of Thoreau, at least in terms of his writings. I found myself once again wanting to get out in my local woods!

This debut novel appealed to me in many ways: I love the writings and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau; I appreciate novels about finding identity; and I enjoy mysteries. The story of a teen who wakes up in Penn Station with no memory of who he is or how he got there--and with only a copy of WALDEN to provide any guidance--BEING HENRY DAVID combines all of these elements into a tight, compelling, and often poignant narrative. As "Hank" (the name he gives himself) follows Thoreau's trail to Concord, Massachusetts, we learn bit by bit what his life was before the amnesia set in, and we learn that he's not only trying to find himself but trying to escape from his past. Lovely writing such as the following illuminates Hank's growing awareness of who he is and what he's fleeing: "I imagine Thoreau standing on this mountaintop in Maine, not the cocky, cranky guy from Concord I've gotten to know, but someone out of place, completely amazed by his surroundings. Scared and humbled by his own existence on the planet." That's as good a description of being a teen--or, heck, a person--as you're likely to get. As Hank inhabits Thoreau's life, he learns not only how hard it is to know yourself but how difficult life can be when you have to face who you are, the things you've done, the mistakes you've made. In some ways, amnesia is easier, and Hank ultimately needs to choose whether to accept his life for what it is or stay on the run from truths he'd rather not face. If there's one thing I didn't much like about BEING HENRY DAVID, it was the obligatory romance; it tried to complement the main story of Hank's quest for identity, but I simply found it distracting. Still, that's a minor complaint about a wonderful book from a fresh new talent. I've corresponded with the author via Twitter, and I learned that a new book is in the works--can't wait!

Even though I have unashamedly never read anything by Henry David Thoreau I really enjoyed this story. It had nice mix of mystery, a bit of action, and a hint of romance. I think the main character's struggle dealing with his guilt with what happened is realistic and something we readers can relate too even if it's not as serious. \*no spoilers\* just read it. :) I would rate this book PG to PG-13 - some of the issues going on are for more mature audiences. (Drinking, some violence)

Being Henry David begins when an injured boy wakes up in Penn Station remembering nothing and carrying only \$10 and a copy of *Walden*. When two homeless kids befriend him, he tells them his name is Henry David and they dub him Hank. After an altercation in which he severely injures a man who attacks him and his new friends, he finds himself on the run again, this time to Concord, Massachusetts where he hopes to find clues to his identity. As his memories slowly return, he is taken in by a librarian who poses as Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond and gets involved with a girl with whom he discovers a mutual love of music. The unraveling of the mystery of his identity is paired with frequent passages from *Walden* which he seems to have memorized. Although finding out who he is and what happened to him is compelling, it is the new relationships he forges in Concord that give the story depth. Teens who haven't read *Walden* may want to pick it up after finishing this unique page turner.

Nice integration of the Thoreau quotes. Solid character development. Made you want to keep turning the pages. Zn enjoyable read.

Love this book! I think that Cal Armistead is right up there with John Green and David Levithan as far as great character development and storytelling. I am an adult who loves young adult fiction and found this particularly appealing because I can imagine it capturing the imagination of young males who might be reluctant to read novels. I love how the quotes from Thoreau are woven into the narrative to bring that part to life without overwhelming the present-day tale.

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