Wednesday, September 5, 1973: The first day of Karl Shoemaker’s senior year in stifling Lightsburg, Ohio. For years, Karl’s been part of what he calls “the Madman Underground”—a group of kids forced (for no apparent reason) to attend group therapy during school hours. Karl has decided that senior year is going to be different. He is going to get out of the Madman Underground for good. He is going to act—and be—Normal. But Normal, of course, is relative. Karl has five after-school jobs, one dead father, one seriously unhinged drunk mother . . . and a huge attitude. Welcome to a gritty, uncensored rollercoaster ride, narrated by the singular Karl Shoemaker.

My Personal Review:
Karl Shoemaker has one goal for his senior year: be normal. He plans on taking it one day at a time, and his quest for normalcy includes letting go of the abnormal in his life. This involves intentionally avoiding his best friend Paul, actually taking college-track classes, meeting new people (girls especially), stopping enabling his alcoholic mother, and staying afloat with his five jobs. Above all else, Karl is looking to punch his ticket out of what he believes is really holding him back: group therapy.

For some reason, teachers in the ’70s thought school-mandated therapy was the best response for kids with problems. With 17 counselors (and counting) over the past five years or so, the Madman Underground certainly has their share of problems. One of the members talks to a stuffed rabbit she carries around, another has crying jags over the littlest things, and the file grows thicker for every other person in the group. Not even a brand new member, a girl named Marti who Karl immediately hits it off with, can keep Karl from wanting to return to the place where "normal" is left at the door. Karl wasn't always a part of group therapy, though, and
he believes there is hope for leaving Lightsburg, Ohio --- and his family’s past --- behind.

The Shoemaker name is famous in Lightsburg, and no one will let Karl forget it. His father, Doug, was a widely popular mayor until an unfortunate political scandal and then an even more untimely death. His mother never quite recovered, and her already heavy drinking led to full-blown alcoholism. Karl never knows what kind of mother will show up on a daily basis and usually manages to tiptoe around her drunken rages. He spends most of his time checking his hidden money caches for IOU’s from his mother and cleaning up the mess of her numerous cats. He cannot wait for the day that he can leave his family scandal behind, but first he must finish his senior year.

TALES OF THE MADMAN UNDERGROUND covers the first six days of Karl's senior year with numerous flashbacks to cover the history of every situation. He is enticed with a get-out-of-group-therapy card from one his teachers, which falls perfectly into his Operation: Be Normal plan. As the days progress, he continually struggles with his desire to overcome his shortcomings and the fact that his identity is firmly planted with the other madmen. Where do his allegiances lie, and was there ever really a possibility that he actually could be normal?

John Barnes never shows whether or not group therapy in school is effective, but he does help readers realize the power of friendship in healing some of life’s problems. The author also shows us that no matter how much we hope or try, it is sometimes impossible to escape who we really are and that is not necessarily horrible. If you’re looking for an upbeat story of a teenager beating the odds, TALES OF A MADMAN UNDERGROUND isn't necessarily your book. Instead, it is a realistic look at how teenagers cope with whatever life has dealt them.

--- Reviewed by Benjamin Boche

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