

he did - invisible, shameful, repressed. # " The Whispers, " the latest novel by the now 52-year-old Nashville author, is his acknowledgement of that. An ode to Howard's real past, the coming-of-age story is set in the rural and religious South where a young boy is discovering who he truly is. # While few books for middle-school-level readers feature a young gay protagonist, Howard's personal story helps create a fictional narrative both realistic and relevant, while also calling on the fantastical magic of the imagination. # Howard grew up in Georgetown, S.C., the third oldest city in the state and the ghost capital of the South. In the coastal factory town, everyone worked in one of the mills, either paper or steel. # As a boy, Howard would wander into the woods beyond the corn fields that stretched behind his house. # Under the canopy of leaves, he would play hide-and-go-seek, build forts and dig tunnels, all the while hoping not to run into any of the gators that trolled the swamps nearby. # He would create fantasy worlds filled with princes and princesses, hobbits and cowboys. # " It was this place where anything was possible, " he said. " I could make the world I wanted. " # His imagination also helped him fill in the parts of his life he couldn't understand - particularly when it came to his mother. # She had cancer, a fast-moving lymphoma that killed her six months after she was diagnosed, at just 26 years old. # Her death was too much for a 5-year-old boy to comprehend. # " I would use my imagination to fill in the holes the adults weren't filling in