

A Native's Tongue

Michael D. Dennis

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Unforgettable characters drive this offbeat, unpredictable tale of three flawed people.

In *A Native's Tongue*, Michael Dennis writes of drugs, sex, love, and obsession among three broken people in Southern California. Dennis's unique plot captivates from the first chapter. However, it is his characters that will be hard to forget.

The novel opens with Jennifer, a young natural blond in a world of fakes, who drives a 2005 Jaguar and pops Xanax like candy, visiting Violet, an angry, irrational older woman, in a correctional facility. When Jennifer meets Violet, the latter ominously rasps, "It was never you that he loved. You know that right?" From there and through alternating narrators, Dennis slowly and masterfully reveals the strange story behind that statement.

Two aspects of this novel make it a pleasure to read. First, it has a plot that is remarkable for its originality. There is a surreal aspect to the story that is fun and fresh. For instance, when one character seriously overdoses, she does not go home to recuperate. Instead, while still dangerously weak and in her hospital gown, she leaves the hospital in a 1970s van with a character she barely knows to embark on a long road trip, stopping for lobster tails and a single strawberry from a roadside vendor. While this is a minor example, this offbeat tone permeates the novel and leads to a completely unpredictable ending. Dennis's use of alternating narrators and nonchronological storytelling further enhances the tone.

Second, character development is exceptional. Dennis begins with three main characters who appear to have no redeeming qualities. The first words Jennifer utters in the novel, to a well-intentioned guard who broke her car window out of concern that she had passed out, are "You Fuck!" Violet, when not incarcerated, stalks her potential lover and attempts to buy love with a Rolex watch. Charlie, the third point in this doomed triangle, seems perfectly content to live off others' largesse in a haze of easy sex, drugs, and questionable hygiene. Despite the motley nature of this cast, however, Dennis manages to engender at least a modicum of compassion for all three by the end of the novel by revealing the long-standing void each is trying desperately to fill.

Dennis's writing style complements the plot and characters. On the one hand, the dialogue is often casual and laced with profanity. This befits these seemingly superficial characters who willingly go where fate takes them. At the same time, internal dialogue reveals their complexity. For example, Charlie describes Jennifer's eyes at their first meeting by musing, "The green stripes in her eyes crisscrossed the indigo blue patchwork woven under cinder brown speckles. I was lost in those carriages of colored harmony. They straddled me and took me on an out of body experience to a farm in the mid-west outside of Wisconsin, where I had always desired to know the secret of a simpler life."

Despite its evident strengths, this novel has one minor flaw: Dennis briefly mentions a possibly magical or supernatural event in the last two pages. This instance seems out of place because the novel ends before it is fleshed out. Nevertheless, the mention is brief, and the ending otherwise satisfies.

Dennis provides an entertaining read with a surprisingly original plot and flawed but ultimately sympathetic characters. For those seeking an edgy novel with an ending that defies prediction, *A Native's Tongue* is not to be missed.

ANNIE PETERS (June 11, 2014)

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