

A Simplified Map of the Real World: The Renata Stories

Stevan Allred

Laurie Paus, Illustrator

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Allred's eloquent word portraits capture each character's own brand of quirks.

A Simplified Map of the Real World is a near-flawless first book that delights with its colorful portrayals of loggers, farmers, families, and even the occasional stripper—the salt-of-the-Earth folks who inhabit the small, rural town of Renata, Oregon. Beautifully crafted and marked by incisive wit, Allred's fifteen interlinked short stories reveal the rich, dark tangle of events and emotions that lie beneath everyday happenings in small-town America, unearthing the sibling rivalries simmering beneath the surface of apparent conviviality, the devastation of divorce, the deadening sadness that follows, and the way innocent young people awaken into first love.

At times humorous, at times deeply disturbing, these tales touch on the highlights of life in Renata—the stolen tractor raced through town and catapulted off a cliff into the river, and the return of a military son to great accolades while his “different,” artistic brother sees beneath the sham to an underlying poverty of spirit. But Allred's greater gift is his consummate skill at illuminating the necessary, mundane affairs of everyday life—the way all farmers talk eventually turns to the weather—and suffusing them with meaning.

Everyone in Renata, it seems, has a secret, but in such a small town, everyone's past is interconnected; everything, even something as common as an old pickle crock, has an unsettling history, and long-kept secrets can suddenly surface, to the despair of those involved.

Through it all, Allred's eloquent word portraits capture each character's own brand of quirkiness: The way a man cracks his knuckles, or runs his fingers along a wooden molding, “stroking it as if it were a Stradivarius,” tells as much about his character and inner conflict as might a paragraph written by a lesser author.

Allred's descriptions are rich, full, and a delight to read. There's Arnie, who has “always been kind of a lump, a man with a body shaped like a fire hydrant and a face like a mole's, dark eyes set close together and big front teeth crowded into a narrow mouth.” And Mike, “a logger, a farmer, a trader, a schemer, and a loud-mouthed, cocksure, bourbon-swilling barnyard bully of a man used to getting his own way.”

Above it all, there are things that are constant—the coming of rain, the flight of geese, the human need for love. Allred's “simplified map” charts the twists and turns of human lives and hearts so deftly that, no matter where they live, readers are given a glimpse into their own “real world.”

KRISTINE MORRIS (Fall 2013)

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