

All the Happiness You Deserve

Michael Piafsky

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A modern morality tale of male hubris, high jinks, and humility comes in brilliant prose.

Author and creative writing professor Michael Piafsky is a word wizard who moves readers from pity to humor to pathos in *All the Happiness You Deserve*. The title is a wry commentary on life's twists and turns that Piafsky's protagonist, Scotty, illustrates as he matures from boyhood to manhood through a destiny determined as much by his behavior as by external circumstances.

Scotty's middle class, Midwestern youth is marred by the behavior of an explosive father and an unhappy mother who abruptly leaves home for two years with his sister and then, just as unaccountably, reappears. "Dinners have become a struggle," Scotty says to himself. "Your father, formerly a joker, an arm puncher, a kidder ... But this father is in hibernation ... Your mother distances herself from your father's rare jokes ... For now, you know only the sudden arguments and the lulls between."

Later, as a young man, still shaken by his sister's recent death in an automobile accident, Scotty begins life anew in Washington state with his girlfriend, Meg. Smitten, he plans to propose to her on a mountaintop ("The ring in your pocket is the rocket fuel pushing you forward"), but after ignoring Meg's advice, he takes another road so full of traffic that reaching the mountain before dark becomes impossible. "So you don't climb to the top and the ring stays in your pocket for another day. Story of your life," Scotty explains to himself in a lament that epitomizes chances he later has as a Wall Street trader, the husband of another woman, and a father.

Piafsky peppers each chapter with prose so dramatic and suspenseful that the book becomes impossible to put down. For instance, as Scotty despairs over his job and his failing relationship with Meg, he makes a mysterious phone call: "The tinny heartbeat of a telephone in a deserted house. It is, after all, a sound you already know intimately." Equally impressive is Piafsky's literary range, which moves seamlessly from the poetic to the humorous to the vernacular.

Piafsky, director of the creative writing program at Spring Hill College in Alabama and former editor of the *Missouri Review*, has written a brilliant book that serves as a cautionary tale for anyone over thirty who feels certain about his or her future.

NANCY RUBIN STUART (Winter 2014)

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