



Allegheny Front

Matthew Neill Null

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Matthew Neill Null's fiction is set in the wilderness of West Virginia, and *Allegheny Front* combines nine of his short works that share a physical setting but tell unique stories. Null's descriptive writing is strong throughout, expertly depicting nature and character interactions with it.

Perhaps the best story in the group is "Telemetry," which focuses on a group of university researchers tagging and studying native trout. They meet a local man and his young daughter, and the two groups' attempts at friendship lead to serious misunderstandings that impact both the characters and the research project. None of the people is a hero or villain. Null shifts sympathy from character to character, making everyone's choices believable. That's a theme in quite a few of the stories in *Allegheny Front*—small-scale but complicated situations in which character motivations both seem realistic and have unintended consequences.

"Rocking Stone" focuses on a quirky great-uncle who enjoys playing pranks on his young relatives, until those pranks backfire. "In the Second District" tells the story of a bear hunt, in which one young man's dishonesty in claiming credit for the kill—and the way others react to that dishonesty—reveals a divide in the morality of the group members. In "The Island in the Gorge of the Great River," a boy develops a crush from afar on a girl who lives on the titular island, where highly contagious patients live out their lives in an infirmary. Null tells his stories from different perspectives and sets them in different time periods, but the West Virginia setting provides reliable connective tissue.

Throughout the stories, rich descriptions of plants and animals join with vernacular dialogue, making characters seem real without ever reducing them to stereotypes. Null showed the same ability in his debut historical novel, *Honey from the Lion*, and *Allegheny Front* reinforces that he is an author with a strong sense of place and character.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Summer 2016)

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