

Arnold Falls

Charlie Suisman

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Arnold Falls is a cozy small-town novel populated by eccentric characters.

Charlie Suisman's lighthearted novel *Arnold Falls* focuses on a New York village's mayoral race.

Named for Benedict Arnold, sister city to Romania's Plopeni, and home to oddballs, Arnold Falls is a busy, colorful enclave. Between its dubious drink of choice (clagger) and Hail Pail Day (in which townsfolk offer milk pails to others), it's every bit as peculiar as its residents.

A loose plot focused on the race between Jenny, who hopes to become Arnold Fall's first woman mayor, and the incumbent, Rufus, is interspersed with vignettes focused on the locals. Together, these parts reveal how life in a small town can resemble having an extended family, with all of its affection and pettiness.

Chapters introduce Jeebe, a 1970s soul music buff, who is an occasional narrator and who brings people together; Bridget, an elderly talent scout with a knack for pickpocketing; Annie, an imperious cooking show host; Nelle, a musically gifted social worker; Doozy, the nonagenarian daughter of a brothel madam; and Will, a volunteer fireman who is known for his monkey greeting cards. They are variously quick-minded, guileless, nosy, and secretive; their foibles are fodder for ribbing. Some characters are sketched in broad terms for the sake of comedy: Rufus and Ivan, who wants to build a tire factory and whose "comb-over looks spring-loaded," are quintessentially and respectively a bumbler and a villain.

Some plot strands, including Jeebe's wish for a relationship with Will, fade for lengthy stretches before resuming in full force. Hints at darker issues, including a character's depression and her need to temporarily run away, are underdeveloped. The ongoing campaign issue of the proposed tire factory—which would cause a historic house to be destroyed—is much discussed, yet not as urgent as it seems.

Banter and funny, over-the-top scenarios take center stage. These include Rufus's shipment of ammonium nitrate to Plopeni and the community's reaction when they hear about it; Bridget's bad luck; and Doozy's flatulence, which she leverages as a threat. These are written with a flair for timing and apt quips. A running side plot involving a beloved turkey and its eventual pardon, and events such as Oktoberfest and a political debate build up the strong community. The result is a madcap environment that reads both as an escapist delight and a tribute to friendships.

Once the election is settled, the book rushes most of its characters toward warm, happy endings. *Arnold Falls* is an original, cozy album of disparate stories whose eccentric characters navigate a bustling upstate setting.

KAREN RIGBY (April 21, 2020)

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