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Balls: A Novel

Julian Tepper
Barnacle Rare Bird (Jul 31, 2012)
Hardcover $24.00 (272pp)
978-0-9839255-7-6

In the early pages of Julian Tepper's simultaneously fretful and funny novel, *Balls*, Henry Schiller, musician, lyricist, and emotionally crooked hero writes a song about his suspicious testicular pain. "A thousand curious aches, / In the course of a lifetime. / Why get unsettled, / Mentally? / For the belly rails. / The brain ails, / The heart, it wails. /And you keep going."

Henry's song belies his true state of mind: He isn't calm, nor collected, nor amenable to the fate of his body's ills (nor those of his mind). We also soon discover the young musician is not only stuck in the dregs of a long-brewing identity crisis, but that "his psychological map had begun redrawing itself."

Balls is Tepper's first novel, and it is brilliantly engrossing. As a protagonist, Henry Schiller is the ultimate anti-guidance counselor in matters of love, life, and career: in search of "equilibrium," and "feeling right," he does everything wrong—and just at the worse possible moment: he has crippling depression, anxiety, or something worse. Yet somehow, again and again, Henry survives himself. Whether he will survive his own reluctance to be treated for a possibly deadly condition, or his own inclinations to self-destruction is another story—and keeps the reader turning pages until the very end.

Tepper's characters are a pleasure to meet. Having visited a therapist, Henry labors to explain why he is there. "He told her of his struggles with music. But he wanted her to talk. He knew his own thoughts, and was tired of them. However, not until the end of the session did she say much of anything. With Henry's throat dry from speech, in the sleep-inducing light, Dr. Andrews, who had exceptional calves, gazed sideways at her patient and said to him…"

What Dr. Andrews says to Henry bounces him toward a new downward track that is surprising and so methodically told as to create a spine-tingling sense of horror of what is to come. And every moment of this relationship is believable and painful to read. Thankfully, this novel is not a downer. In his depiction of Henry, Tepper manages to keep the mood light enough that we don't get bogged down. Henry is, despite all his misery, funny to watch because he is so openly flawed. We are able to walk beside him, understand him, and worry for him.

It's no surprise that author Tepper is himself a musician: his depictions of the layers of the New York music world enriches the novel. We are privy to the classical music scene and all of its petty snobberies, as well as to that darker, less luminous world of the lounge musician battling for attention in a busy, hostile bar. The two worlds alternately clash and shy away from each other, much as Henry both clashes with and evades the messy, cacophonous business of life.

LEIA MENLOVE (August 7, 2012)

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