

Bark On

Mason Boyles

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Bark On is Mason Boyles's free-ranging, fanciful novel about the complex dynamics and extreme training regimen of two triathletes.

Benji, a scandalized former Olympic trainer, recruits and coaches endurance athletes for Ironman competitions in a desolate town on the Carolina coast. A dungeon master with a mullet, he uses intense, unorthodox techniques, such as strapping athletes to the back of his truck for a run. Training with him are eighteen-year-old Casper and twenty-five-year-old Ezra; both struggle for their identities and direction. Their relationship is tenuous: Ezra is threatened by Casper's youth and talent and uncertain of his motives. Eventually they are joined by Ezra's mother—herself an ultra-endurance athlete with a long bucket list of achievements. The three form a makeshift “four-pack of a family.” Their hard-driving regimen has life-changing consequences, however, during the Chapel Hill Ironman competition.

The chapters alternate between people's singular perspectives; their thoughts are raw and shared in stream-of-consciousness style. For instance, Benji considers how his uncle drove him to “nerve-know the solipsis of exhaustion...when your body becomes the world of hurt.” Casper, smart but illiterate, speaks in his own improvised language: “My voice sharps out screamy,” he notes when a workout goes awry. Every sentence, every paragraph, is dense with inventive language. A simple gesture like typing on a cell phone is shown as someone “drizzl[ing their] thumbs over the keypad” and spilling digits “like rain ponds in a ditch.”

Bleak descriptions of the isolated island setting are integral to the story. Packs of coyotes roam it, and the sunrise “congeals” on the boardwalk and storm-shuttered condos like “amber preserving the bones of a beached sea beast.” Driven by uncanny energy and imagination, *Bark On* is a gripping and insightful novel set among endurance athletes who seek acceptance and a family.

KRISTEN RABE (January / February 2023)

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