

Barlow and Other Stories

Robert Willis

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Strong local color and Willis's flair for dialect make this a charming and lively collection.

They don't make men like Barlow Jimson anymore. Born mean and named after his father's clasp knife, Barlow "grew up with a tailor-made chip on his shoulder." As the protagonist of most of the yarns in Robert Willis's new collection *Barlow and Other Stories*, Barlow revives the American tradition of tall tales in a fresh, compelling way.

From the first sentence, Willis makes it clear that *Barlow and Other Stories* isn't standard fare. His narrative voice practically leaps off the page, animating his characters until they are larger than life and twice as natural. Mose Mathis, Barlow's neighbor, exemplifies this world of quirky backwoods types: "His eyes, stemming out of their sockets like a crab's, were jousting with every bush and bramble in sight as he shuffled along." The short stories are accounts of Barlow's misadventures. From chickens in the pea patch to owl eggs, the country-themed tales are reminiscent of Mark Twain or John Kennedy Toole.

After the first hundred pages or so, *Barlow and Other Stories* changes gears. Instead of the Jimson farm, Willis ranges over the Florida panhandle and to distant lands like Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. There is some lovely, smart writing here. In "The Unwinding," Brinsley, a man who's "scrouged his way to the top of a small space metals industry" is so happy that he "was trembling in a froth of pure joy, like spots on the Deschutes."

Concrete details keep fanciful stories pinned to reality, but after a while the folksy language grates. Broad-voweled African American characters, in particular, feel as out-of-date as Mickey Rooney's Japanese impersonations. Although Willis captures a particular time and place in American history, it isn't necessarily one that needs to be revisited.

"Henry the Hustler" is a standout in the collection, showcasing Willis's knack for dialect and attention to staging. A bootlegger entertains a cast of characters during a routine booze delivery that goes sour: "With the homing instinct of a pregnant badger Henry located one of his circumscribed fissures and slipped the jug out of the bag and into it, then he followed up with a mantle of sticks, humus and prevailing detritus." This is Willis at his most playful, and it's a pleasure to read.

Barlow and Other Stories is a strong collection of folksy tales that hearken back to America's earlier days. Offering strong local color and more than a touch of Uncle Remus's storytelling flavor, Barlow is a trip to a time and place so distant that it may as well be make-believe.

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