



Benchere in Wonderland

Steven Gillis

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Art and the role of the artist in society meet with African politics and exploitation in this meditation on action and consequences.

An exploration of the human condition after and amidst tragedy, *Benchere in Wonderland* follows artist Michael Benchere and his rag-tag group of companions to the Kalahari desert, where Benchere builds his largest sculpture to date. In his work that took four years to complete, Steven Gillis turns his eye on art, politics, and the role of the artist in society, if there is one.

Broken up into two parts, *Benchere in Wonderland* begins in a present version of the past, almost as if Benchere relives his flashbacks as he remembers them. Cutting between past and present, book one serves as a means of profiling Benchere and some other characters from his life pre-Africa. Switching gears for the second two thirds of the novel, book two is almost entirely chronological as it follows Benchere's and the others' experiences while building his sculpture in Africa. Benchere interacts with quite a motley crew of characters during his travels and time sculpting. Each serves to further characterize Benchere or to add another perspective on the purpose of art, but keeping track becomes difficult at times.

With Benchere's emotional sphere in a state of flux, it becomes clear that his artistic and political views give him stability; his hardheadedness on these issues help him hold on to his sanity. However, as Benchere moves through the book, each supporting character seems to bend his hard exterior just slightly, helping to flesh out Benchere as a round, nuanced hero. By choosing to have his main character build a giant sculpture in the middle of an African desert during a time of strife in Africa, it is only natural for the political aspects of war, democracy, and state autonomy to come into conversation. Gillis also sets up a conversation about art and the artist's role (or lack thereof) in political conversations. Should art's influence be removed from politics—can it be?

Equal parts adventure, sociopolitical critique, love story, and emotional exploration, *Benchere in Wonderland* is a meditation on the fact that “all actions have consequences,” whether immediately predictable or not.

GENEVIEVE SHIFKE ALI (Fall 2015)

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