



Bratwurst Haven

Rachel King

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In the dozen linked short stories of Rachel King's gritty collection *Bratwurst Haven*, lovable, flawed characters navigate aging, parenthood, and relationships.

Set in Colorado in the recent past, the book depicts a gentrifying area wherein blue-collar workers struggle to afford childcare and health insurance. As Gus, their boss at St. Anthony Sausage, withdraws their benefits and breaks in response to a recession, it's unclear whether the business will survive.

Young men impregnate their girlfriends; older women devise new projects to make up for empty nests. A man's whole life is traced, from growing up near an Italian bakery to war service, his wife's death, and his various jobs. Work buddies congregate at Fred's Bar and for poker nights. Most of the cast assembles in the final story.

Each story covers the perspective of a different St. Anthony employee. The connections between tales are subtle. In "Visitation Day," Elena, considered unstable for alcoholism and a suicide attempt, prepares for a supervised visit with her baby daughter at the public library; "At the Lake" shares the almost-retired librarian's view of these meetings as she frets about Elena's well-being. Addiction, midlife searches for purpose, and grandparents acting in the role of parents are recurrent themes.

Men and women have equal billing, and there are Latinx and Native American characters, too. Other members of the book's loose constellation include a USDA factory inspector who takes a road trip to her mother's with her ex-military sister and a bartender whose painting hobby is the subject of "Murals." The small-town atmosphere does not denote homogeneity, nor does it guarantee comfort with diversity: The title immigrant in "Pavel" is as likely to be shunned for his homosexuality as he is for his origins.

Bratwurst Haven is an endearing composite portrait of a working class community in transition.

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