

Brushstrokes

Loren Hayle

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This is a coming-of-age tale—with a hint of a warning—for those who dream of dazzling futures.

A well-drawn hero, engaging dialogue, and a surprising plot twist make *Brushstrokes* by Loren Hayle an unconventional coming-of-age novel.

Painter Braylon spends his days stocking shelves at his uncle's small-town hardware store, dodging the aggressive advances of would-be girlfriend Tasha, and dreaming of a different destiny. At nearly thirty, he fears that the only paintbrushes that will ever earn him a living are the ones he sells to customers. After he mars a near-perfect painting in a stockroom accident, Braylon considers giving up art altogether—at least, until his discarded masterpiece catches the eye of Tiffany Francesca, a gallery curator who happens to be in the area to attend a family funeral.

Francesca invites Braylon to show his work at Araneae, a New York City gallery that she operates with two longtime friends. It turns out the gallery isn't the only enterprise that occupies these three beautiful and powerful women. The dark truth behind their shared interest in finding fresh male artists propels the plot to its surprising climax following an opening reception where Braylon's work is well received.

Like its protagonist, this novel is most at home when it sticks to the familiar setting of Braylon's hometown. There, a charming cast of characters populate and propel the plot, throwing house parties and using colorful dialogue. Such scenes are at their most entertaining when they star Braylon's perpetually drunk friend Herbie, who at one point declares, "I always was destined for greatness," demonstrating both his likability and laughability in a single slurred sentence. And, like Braylon, the book tends to go astray when it travels to New York, where characters' murky motivations are conveyed through barely covered backstories and overtly sexual dialogue that is often at odds with the sophisticated setting.

Though the novel contains some lapses of proper punctuation and a misused word or two, it has generally solid syntax, and its characters and dialogue in Braylon's hometown setting are well detailed, especially when compared to the cast and conversation in New York. Still, the seductive story elements that drive *Brushstrokes* once it hits New York City could prove appealing to readers interested in the moral challenges faced during quests for success.

Hayle's novel demonstrates an ear for dialogue and a talent for creating charming characters that could make *Brushstrokes* an enjoyable read for anyone who knows what it is like to fantasize about a fabulous future.

CHARLENE OLDHAM (March 16, 2016)

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