



Deadpan: A Novel

Richard Walter

Heresy Press

(254pp)

979-898871731-7

In the satirical novel Deadpan, a surreal case of mistaken identity sparks a twisting tour through celebrity idolatry and antisemitic resentment.

In Richard Walter's humorous novel *Deadpan*, a small-town car salesman blinks and opens his eyes to find himself living as one of America's most beloved comedians.

When Dwight opens his eyes and no longer sees his Buick dealership, instead finding himself sitting in front of a vanity mirror as a world-famous comedian preparing to do a show, all he wants is to explain that there's been a mix-up and to find his way back to Hoggzswallow Hollow, West Virginia. In his original reality, he closes up the dealership, heads to his friend's house to play some music, and ends up spray-painting antisemitic symbols and phrases on the wall of the town's synagogue.

Dwight jumps from a reality where he goes along with blaming Jewish people for causing the energy crisis that is destroying his business to another reality where hundreds of thousands of fans adore him just for saying he's not a comedian but a car salesman. The story flits from West Virginia to Las Vegas and between Hollywood, Riyadh, and Washington, DC, spiraling out of control. In time, a Hoggzswallow police officer investigating the hate crime blows the situation wide open.

The book is as delightful for its wordplay as it is for its imaginative plot. There is a ceaseless joke made out of the name of Dwight's hometown, Hoggzswallow Hollow, that functions as just one example of the syntactical humor running throughout the novel. Another example is a string quartet of showgirls whose names are Arlene, Darlene, Charlene, and Marlene. The text is overflowing with cheerful rhymes and alliterations like these.

The charm and playfulness of the writing has a dual impact. On the one hand, it matches the fun and genuine pleasure of reading an already amusing story. The prose reflects the chaos and evenhanded nonsense of an unpredictable world in a masterful, seamless way. On the other hand, the book takes on some of the most serious of subjects—antisemitism and hate speech—and its sometimes blithe treatments of these topics takes a lot of the bite out of its social critiques.

The vibrant, surprising, and dubious personalities who light up the book's pages also cushion its social commentary. In the end, the story reads more like an elbow nudge and a wink than a biting satire. In one chapter, Dwight is teleported to a bunker underneath the White House only to be shown that the first woman president of the United States is Sarah Palin. And Dwight's septuagenarian mother is also teleported from West Virginia to play a game of strip chess with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the former shah of Iran. In these instances and others, there's a distinct sense that the spaces that people occupy in the world, as well as the bitterness or elation felt toward them, are little more than twists of fate.

In the humorous literary novel *Deadpan*, a man from a small town in West Virginia is taken on a journey of self-

discovery.

BEN LINDER (December 29, 2023)

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