

Domestic Affairs: Tales of American Males

Daniel M. Jaffe

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Challenging and exquisite, the short stories of Domestic Affairs demand to be met on their own terms.

Daniel M. Jaffe's charming short story collection *Domestic Affairs* depicts tender and erotic relationships between men in a variety of locales. With wit and warmth, Jaffe pulls off daring and playful experiments with form and genre.

Many of the stories in this collection focus on older gay men—some of them bouncing back from divorce, others facing down dementia with a lifelong partner, and all of them with rich sexual lives. In "Gayberry RFD," intimate meetings while on vacation in a gay Floridian community force Sam to reckon with the sacrifices he made to assimilate into straight society. An unexpected message from a former homophobic boss inspires Tony toward similar reflection on his time in the closet in "Salumia." Even when sex is not explicit on the page, references to trysts are plenty. These encounters often give voice to cross-generational desire between young men and "daddies"—affairs that are as affectionate as they are sensual.

On the flip side of the book's realist musings are stories that embrace what's strange, dipping their toes into satire, absurdism, and fantasy. "The Great Masturbator" unfolds in dreamlike sequences as a circus artist performs bizarre rituals of self-pleasure. God takes the form of a sexually motivated online avatar in "A Woman and Her Men." While this surrealism is often played off for laughs, it also leads to more serious ends.

Intimacy is a balm for loneliness and isolation in stories with a speculative edge. "Helping Hands" follows a man easing back into the world after COVID-19 lockdowns with the aid of a pair of disembodied hands that are intent on pleasuring him. In "The Procedure," a near-future pandemic forces Floyd into a high-tech total quarantine, made livable only through frequent virtual calls with friends and lovers, until even those social tethers are severed.

In addition to its genre bending, the book boasts exquisite prose leading to surprises and moments of devastation. "Sounds for Jamie's Birthday" stands out for its unique syntactic rhythm; its sentences act as fractured conduits for the stream of consciousness of the narrator, who is suffering through childhood sexual abuse. Thoughts bleed together, with words and phrases acting as the hinge on which meanings shift: "The Sounds sponged up each lady's card slap against the tabletop downstairs resounded too quietly for me actually to hear but I knew everything happening in each corner of that house was somewhere else I needed to be anywhere except inside me The Man kept pumping." It is a challenging story, in subject matter and construction, and it demands to be met on its own terms.

Jewish American culture is celebrated with humor throughout the collection, while "Salumia" includes thoughtful engagement on the role women play in gay men's lives. Elsewhere, though, there are surface level analyses of prejudice: a person of color and a transgender love interest act as springboards for white, cisgender heroes to broaden their own perspectives in "Longshot" and "Enchantment," impeding the depth of both. Still, even in the collection's campiest tales, the dignity of the idiosyncratic characters' inner lives is apparent.

The often surprising short stories collected in *Domestic Affairs* take aim at intimacy, aging, and desire, addressing

each with an experimental bent.

LUKE SUTHERLAND (November 29, 2023)

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