ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

God Hates Fags
Joe Wellman
Second City Books
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Three Stars (out of Five)

In his shockingly-titled third novel, retired teacher Joe Wellman examines the consequences of homophobia in a conservative Illinois town. As the story opens, schoolteacher Sean Goehl is found dead with the words “God Hates Fags” scrawled on his forehead. Few in town knew Sean was gay, least of all his pregnant wife. However, police soon link the outing of Sean to firebrand preacher Jeremiah Mathews, who revealed Sean’s sexual orientation during one of the many sermons he gave decrying homosexuality. In the wake of Sean’s death, lawmen work to solve the crime while those left behind struggle with conflicting emotions and find themselves caught up in an unexpected series of events.

Wellman’s story alternates between chapters describing the buildup of the case and those examining the points of view of the people linked in various ways to Sean. This chorus of multiple voices gives readers the impression that they are eavesdropping on the small town as the flesh-and-blood inhabitants gossip and reveal tales of woe. Through the perspectives of so many individuals, Wellman deftly examines the many shades of both prejudice and tolerance, as well as how the past can affect present attitudes.

Interestingly, Jeremiah and the murderers elicit sympathy instead of condemnation because Wellman takes time to explain the causes of their homophobia and makes them well-rounded characters. It is a relief that no one in this town is portrayed as the stereotypical bigoted hick. Wellman accurately portrays the way many individuals still view homosexuality. In addition, the author adroitly presents the ulterior motives of the politicians and activists who become involved in Sean’s case.

While the many viewpoints strengthen the author's message, they also make the story a bit confusing. As Wellman goes back and forth between the characters' pasts and the present investigation, it can be difficult to remember how the case is progressing. It is also hard to keep track of the multiple time lines. And although the author's chorus of voices is valuable, some of the people and subplots seem superfluous.

The plot goes off the rails at the end as Wellman tries too hard to get his message across. Indeed, readers will be left wondering what the author hoped to achieve besides surprising them with the incendiary title and cover picture.

The intended audience of *God Hates Fags* remains unclear, but those who delve into it may at least be rewarded with a thought-provoking treatise on prejudice.

Jill Allen