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Greetings from Below

David Philip Mullins
Sarabande Books (January 2011)
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The aggregate tale created by the linked stories in David Philip Mullins's award-winning *Greetings from Below* is not so much a coming-of-age story as one of growth through attrition. Mullin's impressive debut traces the pivotal moments of Nick Danze's burgeoning adult life, from his teenage sexual awakenings and his subsequent search for love to his role as helpless witness to his mother's decline. His moral center is moored, then unmoored, in Las Vegas, in a home made unfamiliar by his father's absence.

Mullins' stories find Nick Danze down and out in the wreckage of a famous plane crash, at a swingers' sex-mansion late on Christmas Eve, and on the branch of the tree from which he watches his wife and her lover. He finds first love and quickly watches it fade, then stumbles through one confused affair after another. Although Nick has fled Las Vegas, most of the stories take place during his sporadic returns home as he struggles to help his mother, who since her spouse's death has been simultaneously binging on shopping, gambling, cigarettes, and sugar.

Mullins' Las Vegas stereotypes are recognizable: the strippers, the gamblers, the scorching heat, and ever-present bright neon illuminating one constant holiday. But Mullins also writes of those the glitz never touches, the people who dream of working at electric plants, who chase an elusive big payday, search for escape, or, like Nick, strive to understand the mysteries of their own hearts.

It is a remarkable thing to find a collection of quality, stand-alone stories loosely linked by theme or setting which cohere into a narrative greater than its separate parts. "True Love Versus the Cigar-Store Indian," a particularly strong and typically wrenching story, finds Nick cheating on his long-suffering love, Annie, with a woman nearly two decades his senior. Afterwards, Nick considers a wooden Indian sculpture across the street that seems to stare into his window. "He looked uncompromising, unfeeling," Nick muses. "He looked like he could hurt people, like he had the stomach for it. He was just as contemptible as I was, and he reminded me of everything I hated about myself."

In these stories, Nick encounters his irresolution, his frequent infidelities, his failure to either love or leave Annie, his shortcomings as a novelist, and his inability to save his mother. One by one, these stories chronicle the trials of a young man exploring the dark places of his soul, grappling with what he finds there, and, step-by-painful-step, learning what it is to journey into adulthood.
MICHAEL BEEMAN (December 19, 2010)

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