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Heading out to Wonderful

Robert Goolrick
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“Childhood is the most dangerous place of all. If we had to live there forever, we wouldn’t live very long,” observes the narrator of *Heading Out to Wonderful*, a lyrical meditation on longing, childhood, and the loss of innocence. Sixty years have passed since the central action of the story. “The thing is, all memory is fiction,” the narrator begins. “Time changes things, and you don’t always get everything right.”

Brownsburg, Virginia, in 1948, was a place “where most people lived a simple life without yearning for things they couldn’t have.” But the narrator’s idealistic depiction of the town is challenged by unspooling episodes of narrow-mindedness, judgmentalism, and racism that smothered whatever dreams the people there might have had.

Into this claustrophobic small town, Charlie and Sylvan arrive suddenly, like tropical birds blown off course and stranded in an inhospitable clime. They recognize something unnameable in each other, an intoxicating cocktail of longing, mystery, and isolation.

When Charlie arrives with his suitcases, one full of butcher knives and one full of money, the local butcher hires him, advising, “When you’re young, and you head out to wonderful, everything is fresh and bright as a brand new penny, but before you get to wonderful you’re going to have to pass through all right. And when you get to all right, stop and take a good, long look.” Brownsburg, the butcher tells Charlie, is all right.

Charlie and Sam, the butcher’s son, quickly become inseparable, “because Charlie had been a prisoner of his own childhood, he had never really stopped being a child himself.”

Then Sylvan walks into the butcher shop, and that, the narrator tells us, is when the story becomes “a tale that’s passed down from father to son as a warning.” The new wife of the despised local rich man, Sylvan dreams childhood dreams ripped from the pages of the movie magazines she pored over in the rude cabin of the remote hollow she came from.

In their own ways, Charlie and Sylvan are as childlike as Sam. But Sam’s struggle to understand and to keep Charlie’s secrets is especially poignant and flawlessly rendered. On a surface level, this beautifully written novel tells a compelling story. Better yet, like a good poem, deeper layers of meaning await discovery. Is “heading out to wonderful” a child’s folly when “all right” should be good enough?

Robert Goolrick is the author of the #1 New York Times bestseller *A Reliable Wife* and the memoir *The End of the World as We Know It.*

KAREN MULVAHILL (Fall 2012)

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