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Jewelweed

David Rhodes
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A novel that revels in the nuances of ordinary lives, crafts beauty from loneliness, and will make readers fall back in love with good writing.

The people of Words, Wisconsin, push quietly through their lives. The past is a heavy, wet fog that won't lift, but the hope of a better future—like a faint white line on the horizon—keeps them steady. At the center of their lives is Blake Bookchester, an inmate in the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility, a maximum-security prison that houses "the worst of the worst." Soon, Blake will leave prison to live with his father and work at a repair shop—a job arranged by Winnie Helm, the town's pastor and the woman responsible for his release.

As Blake struggles to adjust to life outside the suffocating walls of prison, the families that surround him must work to overcome the difficulties that burden their lives—terminally ill children, spiritual crises, forbidden loves, poverty—and find solace in the fleeting but fulfilling moments that make up their present. *Jewelweed* is the story of these families, their histories, and the fragile bonds that connect them together in surprising and often secretive ways.

Rhodes's characters are gently wrought with an attention to detail that makes them intimate and whole. From a pastor who struggles to answer an inner call to unsullied goodness, to a family falling slowly and peacefully apart as a sick son wisps quietly through life, to an angry mother viewed through the vigilant eyes of her son—the characters are human, their struggles and motivations deeply felt.

The truths that these characters evoke are due largely in part to the quality of Rhodes's prose. Using simple, unmannered language, Rhodes carves out characters in one or two swift lines that pinpoint the very marrows of their existence: "Lucky wanted to be admired and Amy wanted to belong, and the paths leading to these respective fulfillments headed in different directions." The work is also revelatory, striking at universal, inward epiphanies. In describing Blake's difficulty reentering civilian life, Rhodes writes, "As he reclaimed each sensation, an alarm of sad familiarity rang inside him, a dark beckoning to return to someone he could no longer be."

Jewelweed is an ode to "ditch beauty"—the small, fragile bursts of bright hope that unfurl even in the unlikeliest of places. It's a novel that revels in the nuances of ordinary lives and crafts beauty from a loneliness that seems inescapable. More than anything, this is a book that will make readers fall back in love with good writing.
SHOILEE KHAN (May 31, 2013)

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