

Lost in Summerland: Essays

Barrett Swanson

Counterpoint (May 18, 2021)

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Barrett Swanson's eloquent book *Lost in Summerland* combines personal essays, journalism, and travelogues into a memorable collection.

The book opens with "Notes from a Last Man," which at first seems to be an essay about spending a winter in Florida instead of Wisconsin. But as the piece unfolds, Swanson's battle with depression is revealed in subtle, descriptive terms. It's an indication of what's to come: in this and thirteen other entries, personal recollections and reflections mix with on-site reportage, resulting in compelling accounts of volunteering as a victim in a rescue worker training exercise, or of visiting a *West Wing* fan convention. Other subjects include a near fatal attack on Swanson's brother, and that same brother's later development of what he believes are spiritual abilities. Serial killer conspiracy theories, social media, OCD, a Florida social visionary, and veterans making a go of organic farming also appear.

The book's wide, sophisticated vocabulary makes even its most pedestrian statements and recounted dialogue enjoyable, though its complex wording leads to occasional obfuscation, as when Swanson writes about a girl who once saw "God's light" in him, and admits to having wondered "what particular torsion of mind made divine valences legible to her." Uncommon synonyms are also employed; whether these come across as a matter of artistic license, or as imprecise choices, will depend on the preferences and predilections of the reader.

Swanson's perspectives are empathetic and honest. The people and situations he describes are considered with the care of a sociologist, but also a sensitive heart. The essay collection *Lost in Summerland* forwards a smorgasbord of ideas, people, and places, all filtered through the perceptions of a skilled writer.

PETER DABBENE (May / June 2021)

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