

Monarchs in the Wild

Israel Moya

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In Israel Moya's engaging coming-of-age novel *Monarchs in the Wild*, an aimless teenage boy living in a place with few options considers life after high school.

In a small California town in the 1990s, Cal is about to graduate high school. He lives with his religious mother, works bagging groceries, and spends most of his free time trying to keep his beloved, beat-up vintage Mustang running. He has anger and abandonment issues and a reputation in town that's made worse by the ever-present scars on his face. In a constant cycle of damage and repair that mirrors his experiences with his car, he neglects to plan for the future and ignores the personal relationships that could give his life more meaning.

When Cal finds a popular classmate's body near the train tracks, the police question him, and others are suspicious. He faces threats from neighborhood gang members and tries to avoid pressure from his mother's church. Shakeups at work also force Cal to deal with the changes around him and think about his future.

As he narrates, Cal confronts his mixed feelings about his circumstances. Through him, the desolation of small town-life is made palpable. He knows that even farm work is hard to find, and college is an unlikely outcome for most of his classmates.

Like Cal's life, the story gets a bit stuck in its middle section, when Cal's focus on car repair pushes more important concerns to the periphery. It gains momentum again as new challenges force Cal to question his stable, though not comfortable, situations and find new directions. Surprising obstacles keep the story moving, forcing Cal to confront a surprising past trauma.

In the memorable coming-of-age novel *Monarchs in the Wild*, a boy struggles to escape his small-town life.

JEFF FLEISCHER (May / June 2026)

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