

## Most Perfect Things about People

**Mark Jordan Manner**

Tailwinds Press (Apr 17, 2017)

Softcover \$14.00 (334pp)

978-0-9967175-4-0

*At the luminous center of this novel is a family that, however they are dispersed, finds a way to endure.*

*Most Perfect Things About People* is a naturalistic novel-in-portraits that explores violence in Southern Ontario. With remarkable insight, Mark Jordan Manner captures the fragile defenses that people erect. Stopping short of the hard-boiled, his visceral stories backstitch through memories and move forward through the years to highlight imprints left on working lives.

Trigger Beally, the son of a Holocaust survivor, is also an abusive father, and his ten-year-old son, Soccer, is already no stranger to fighting. When Soccer kills another child and runs away, his family unravels.

Twenty-three stories alternate between Soccer's parents and five siblings; their lovers; neighbors; the victim's parents; relatives; and strangers who are touched by one or another of the Beallys. Without laying blame for Soccer's volatility, the book spans generations to examine a dark legacy.

Soccer is the source of the inciting event, but it's the survivors who take center stage. Each learns to get by in the only way they know how. Themes of teenage self-harm and failed attempts at human connection build toward a stark understanding that pain often lingers unresolved. As an outsider remarks, "You carry the hard parts with you wherever you go." The book wisely complicates such observations through characters who sometimes surprise themselves with hope.

Of these portraits, a few stand out for their unexpected distance from the event. One Japanese writer dives into a headlong search for Soccer after seeing his face on a poster and believing it resembles her uncle's. A childhood friend turned partner, who encounters one of the Beally sisters through sexual sadism, reveals brutality and tenderness in a relationship marked as much by habit as by loyalty.

Whether the people orbiting the Beallys—or the Beallys themselves—experience real or perceived trauma, the book paints disillusionment with sharp contours. Emotional neediness never turns pathetic; it's given a full rationale. When unblemished devotion does appear, it's an arresting counterpoint in an otherwise gritty book.

Steeped in childhood impressions both jagged and familiar, the beauty of *Most Perfect Things About People* rests in its careful, psychological interiors. As memories bleed toward the edges of the page, a luminous center is revealed: a troubled family, however dispersed, can still find reasons to endure.

KAREN RIGBY (May/June 2017)

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