



New Leaves in Winter

C. Gary Johnston

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The dramatic novel New Leaves in Winter homes in on workplace tensions surrounding job security and incompetent bosses.

In C. Gary Johnston's novel *New Leaves in Winter*, two managers fret over the changing dynamics at their place of employment.

Although Dan and Joan occupy managerial positions at Starlingers Food Markets and are good at their jobs, they seem unable to enjoy the cheerfulness that comes with December. They worry, overthink, and analyze every detail of their lives, especially the question of whether they will still be employed come January. With the recent strange occurrences at the company—like the vague text the grandson of the founder of Starlingers and the apparent heir to the company sent to Joan before becoming incommunicado, Dan's risky raffle win, and the sudden power being wielded by the general counsel of the company—their anxiety builds to the point of paranoia.

Dan's good-humored relationship with his wife, Lizzy, adds a satisfying dynamic to the story. Their family setup is warm: Lizzy loves to chatter and tends to answer for Dan. This causes her to put him in a sticky situation that could cost him his job. She further fuels Dan's distress by having a great time at the Christmas luncheon they attend.

Indeed, the book's characterizations are steady on the whole. Its cast exemplifies human flaws and biases. For instance, Dan criticizes Leffler, a man he meets at the Christmas luncheon and whom he considers to be self-righteous. He then goes on to assume the worst about Leffler, even blaming him for exposing a secret without any evidence.

Each chapter is dated, which helps when it comes to tracking the back-and-forth narration, and the story alternates between Dan and Joan's perspectives well. However, the prose is often too expository to maintain a sense of suspense. Details abound, but many are overexplained in Joan's and Dan's thoughts, and the effect is stultifying. As the novel progresses, its intensity is further compromised by its everyday events, despite the buildup toward the revelation of what's happening behind the scenes at Starlingers. When the revelation occurs, it functions more as an explanation than as a point of satisfaction, tying up loose ends in a tidy but unexciting manner. Though many managers and key players have their storylines resolved, some questions remain, including about the future of someone who plays a vital role in the company.

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GABRIELLA HARRISON (April 26, 2023)

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