

Odsburg

Matt Tompkins

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Matt Tompkins's *Odsburg* is a unique kind of story—almost too novel to be considered a novel at all. Within it, self-taught researcher Wallace Jenkins-Ross sets out to document the town of Odsburg. The data he accumulates is tantamount to a reflection in a fun-house mirror: too outrageous to be taken seriously, yet too accurate a portrayal of the subject's essence to be dismissed.

Wallace's unorthodox methods consist of embedding himself within the community to examine its culture via the stories its residents tell. Some stories are revealed in a direct way, through conversations with residents or by being in the right place at the right time. Others make their way to him through official documents, notices on telephone poles, and scraps of paper tossed out of car windows.

Wallace is as meticulous as he is forthright in setting the scene for each story, disclosing any possible grounds for researcher bias. Honesty about his lack of objectivity makes him all the more trustworthy. Ultimately, his own story infiltrates the others.

As entertaining and hilarious as the tales are, their most astonishing feat resides within their capacity to compel belief in the inconceivable. The book's historical documents, whether they are excerpts from the town charter or a timeworn diary, are faithful to the syntax and sentiments of their day. Recorded stories, like that of an English graduate student prone to referencing literature and mythology, reflect the teller's experience of life too authentically to validate skepticism. Even authorial recountings, based upon stories that are surreptitiously observed, are too graphic to invite doubt.

Perhaps Matt Tompkins's *Odsburg* is more grounded in theory than it seems; it comes close to proving Wallace's hypothesis that a community's stories are the purest measure of how its inhabitants live, work, play, and find meaning in their lives.

LINDA THORLAKSON (November / December 2019)

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