

Ring On Deli

Eric Giroux

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Ring On Deli is a rousing and rewarding novel whose everyday heroes resist excessive leaps forward.

In Eric Giroux's witty contemporary novel *Ring On Deli*, grocery store workers are determined to stand in the way of technology's bulldozer.

Ray is almost eighteen, and his brother Patrick is just eleven, when their parents die in an car accident. Without relatives, pragmatic Ray scouts a town cheap enough for them to afford. He lands a job at its only grocery store. Six years later, he's still making sandwiches there and trying to parent Patrick through his confused adolescence. And even though change is coming, the eccentric townspeople resist the store's proposed automation.

Whimsical humor and fresh, descriptive language characterizes Ray's narration. He observes the comical nature of the people and situations around him and responds to his circumstances with generous acceptance. He even regards the town's ruinous, wild-roaming pigs as residents who've established their own customs and festivities. But when modernization rips at the social fabric of the grocery store, he stretches his observations to include unemployment, losses of pride, and a shrinking sense of community. The town's self-sufficiency is threatened, as are its poor but proud citizens, who live on sell-by-date bargains and discards.

Ray's intelligence and maturity are apparent as he extends patience and care to others. Patrick is his counterpoint: he remembers their father's alcoholism and dances with its lingering shadows. Patrick tests Ray's patience and optimism, and his actions are a darker reflection of small-town, post-industrial America.

The large and boisterous secondary cast includes descendants of the Italian clan that founded the grocery store, who now fight over whether to keep it as is or strip it down to a robotized profit center; hapless locals who cling to the town's melting iceberg of capitalism; a school principal who's done everything right, but who ended up underpaid and lonely; an erudite store manager who fills in the blanks left by Ray's education; and a teacher who battles terminal cancer long enough to leave Patrick on a firmer footing. Each is carved with precision.

The story glides along, weaving from character to character with facility and holding interest with its smorgasbord of sidebars. These cover Patrick's caustic take on *The Brady Bunch* and a history of the town written in 1892 that's both laugh-out-loud funny and convincing. By the time the grocery store imposes modernization, everyone in the book has a stake in the outcome, and open rebellion breaks out.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (June 15, 2020)

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