

Saint Wally

Courtney Taylor

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A fun ride and a pleasure to read, Saint Wally subverts classic expectations of heaven and hell.

Walter arrives at heaven's pearly gates just in time for everything to go to hell. Courtney Taylor's *Saint Wally* presents a comically wonky picture of the afterlife and of biblical and historical characters. It is at times a romp through history and at others a playful reimagining of the stories of classic figures from the Bible.

The protagonist, Wally, is in his early forties and new to heaven. Just after he arrives, Lucifer dares God to create a boulder too heavy for even him to carry. God takes the challenge and in the strain of attempting to do so, entraps himself inside a glass box. Lucifer and his cronies plot to leverage the captive God for their own evil purposes. Wally is enlisted to help, as is the VP, Jesus, and a collection of heaven's finest. As they search, the seams that hold the celestial worlds together—or, rather, apart—begin to come undone. A hero is needed, and Jesus and the saints don't seem up to the task.

Taylor's writing is light and playful. He plays with expectations, using them to his advantage with surprising characterizations and descriptions of the classically imagined biblical afterlife. Heaven is forgiving; even Hitler has a place. God is an incessantly kind figure of benevolence and good cheer. Jesus is a redneck burnout with an alcohol problem, who, it turns out, spent most of his time on earth in a drunken stupor, taking direction from the Holy Spirit (an albino parrot; the white dove was a wild misconception). Lucifer is an overly confident narcissist, bumbling through cringe-inducing quotes, poems, and songs. As a result, character development is less about personal growth and more about comic effect, as each new description and categorization ups the ante in the delightful absurdity.

The tone is equally light and reads like a sustained sugar high. The book's energy starts high and stays high, perhaps detracting from some of the emotional gravitas that comes later in the story. Mostly, though, it coasts along with dialogue drenched in puns, punch lines, and dad jokes. The characters are clever in a slapstick sitcom way, which makes them seem less like people and more like caricatures.

The narrative style is straightforward and plot-driven and the book moves at a rapid clip. The hangups of the story line mostly come from the spiritual tics and eccentricities that continue to be established through the novel's end. Plot intricacies that revolve around the rules of the universe get sticky. These confusing elements give the impression that Taylor was still hammering down final details of the world when he finished writing.

Saint Wally is a fun ride and a pleasure to read. It subverts classic expectations of heaven and hell, and reimagines the world as a kinder—and stranger—place.

VALERIE HAMRA (April 13, 2015)

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