

Sommelier of Deformity

Nick Yetto

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Intensely dark and sardonic, *Sommelier of Deformity* is also, paradoxically, an uplifting and redemptive story.

Buddy Hayes, a self-described troll who spends most of his time alone, is both arrogant and self-deprecating. He limits his human contact mostly to his mother and paraplegic grandfather, Puppa, who live downstairs.

The local librarian is alluring to him, and he has covert sexual liaisons with women he meets online. He obsesses over his own ugliness: "In x-ray, you might mistake me for the missing link; in the flesh, for a human prototype that was deemed unworthy of production."

While his physical world is narrow, Buddy's imagination is wide-ranging, and his internal monologues are rollicking. His well-armored life changes when he meets Terrance, a strikingly handsome man and gifted banjo player, who is Puppa's new home nurse. Buddy and Terrance forge an unlikely, sometimes awkward friendship that is transformational. Haltingly, Buddy is drawn out of the shadows. He risks friendships and works to uncover the mystery of what he can offer.

Compelling and accomplished, Nick Yetto's debut novel sparkles with vivid characters, startling twists, and outrageously comedic dialogue. He hews an especially strong sense of place through Buddy's moldering upstate New York town: "a tangle of alleyways, one-way streets, vacant lots, cars on cinderblocks ... South Ilium is brick, and it is rust."

While the author describes this work as absurdist fiction, it is not a story of a hopeless protagonist battling a meaningless world. Instead, Buddy is a flawed but steely Hephaestus on a quest for meaning who tentatively begins shaping a new life. For all of its tawdry and graphic language, *Sommelier of Deformity* is in the end a sympathetic, touching story of healing, community, and self-acceptance.

KRISTEN RABE (July/August 2018)

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