

## Stockboy Nation

**Thomas Duffy**

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*Stockboy Nation is a contemporary novel about growing through hardships.*

In Thomas Duffy's novel *Stockboy Nation*, a former bestselling author deals with midlife insecurity after his job prospects wane.

Phillip, a New Yorker in his forties, is in a strained relationship with Melissa, a lawyer. After their move to California, Melissa finds Phillip unambitious. She is also still upset about a past lie he told. Tight finances, few new writing ideas, and a halfhearted job search lead Phillip to the San Diego branch of Milton's World of Fun, a bookshop and novelty store for which he'd previously worked in Times Square.

Despite Phillip's quick rise to become the assistant supervisor, the job is a dead end. When Melissa breaks up with him, Phillip heads back to Milton's in New York. During the lockdown, he and Melissa begin speaking again; he also strikes up a conversation with LeAnn, a college teacher with whom he might have a romantic connection.

The first half of the book concentrates on Phillip and Melissa's relationship, which revolves around routine patterns. Its settings are developed in a cursory manner, and its exposition is sparse. Early events are conveyed in a matter-of-fact way, and the novel marches forward without much reflection or background information. More space is devoted to conversations, but still: early on, with their emotions covered most in terms of quick observations, Phillip and Melissa are flat examples of pieces of a once-loving couple that was worn down by familiarity.

In New York, Phillip's relationships are furthered by phone calls with Melissa, LeAnn, and a support helpline. These exchanges, while they are encouraging for Phillip, meander; Phillip comes across as needy and malleable. A Zoom call featuring former coworkers highlights the distant, strange situation which the characters find themselves in, but also seems like a filler scene, wedged between Phillip's sometimes immature indecisions about his future.

Both Melissa and LeAnn are supportive and believe that Phillip is a worthy partner with potential, and so they send him food and offer him money, seeming to ignore his dependency and insecurity. Their affection for him is puzzling, particularly absent information about Phillip and Melissa's past relationship. LeAnn seems to presume, rather than to witness, Phillip's literary talent; his writing life recedes beneath his shame over still working in retail. Further, not all of the story's developments are natural, including Phillip's late interest in praying more, Melissa's expressed desire to act, or LeAnn's flight from San Diego to New York. Rather, much of what happens seems to spring from impulsive decisions and general dissatisfaction. The book's ultimate conclusion is a tentative one.

As its characters cope with unexpected detours, *Stockboy Nation* is a contemporary novel about growing through hardships.

KAREN RIGBY (November 24, 2020)

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