

Sunland

Don Waters

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An unlikely drug dealer supplying an old folks home comes of age in a fast-paced, dynamic new novel of ethics and identity.

In richly descriptive and propulsive prose, Don Waters' dynamic debut, *Sunland*, dissects the meanings of aging, manhood, family, and the borders erected between people and nations, all against the backdrop of the unforgiving Arizona sun. His mid-thirties protagonist, Sid Dulaney, experiences a delayed yet highly potent coming of age in a novel that explores many questions, including how to separate what is against the law from what is ethically right or wrong.

The notion of family has always been a confusing one for Sid, whose father died when he was just a boy. As the novel opens, Sid spends his days caring for his widowed octogenarian Nana in her pricey care facility under "the shimmering heat of ... the parrot-green Arizona sky." To help offset her rising costs, Sid learns to cross the Mexican border and seek out cut-rate pharmaceuticals for her at discreet hole-in-the-wall pharmacies and smuggle them back into the country.

Word spreads and soon Sid is an international drug dealer for a growing cohort of old folks, eventually enlisting help from beautiful Danni, a childhood friend from the nearby Native American Tohono O'odham nation. When Sid starts to fall for Mona, a nurse in the old-age home who challenges the ethics of his behavior, Sid questions his future. He comes to see his long-term singledom as a form of arrested development and faces critical decisions about his future.

Waters, whose previous short-fiction collection, *Desert Gothic*, won an Iowa Short Fiction Award, offers finely tuned and fast-moving prose punctuated with unique descriptive language. Sid's Nana is marked with experience that's written on her body: "large purple veins, thick as earthworms, lining the tops of her hands." The menacing guy who tries to extract kickbacks from Sid's illicit drug shopping has an unkempt mane that makes him resemble "uncircumsized foreskin."

Through Sid's best friend, Warsaw, who follows the teachings of an outré philosopher of masculinity, and an elderly gay man named Garland Bills, and other characters, Waters explores competing modes of male identity. The book is full of expressions of randy male libido, counterbalanced with unexpected and moving moments of same-sex intimacy, as when Warsaw asks his friend to shave his back or Sid reminisces of awkward moments when his now-deceased grandfather used to kiss his teenage cheek.

On this road to a self-determined male identity and the realization of his desire for a family of his own, Sid faces multiple crises of conscience, as when he contemplates the role he's played in enabling one of his aging clients' burgeoning opiate addiction. While short, readable, and fast-paced, *Sunland* leaves the reader with plenty of weighty matters for consideration long after the final page has been turned.

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