

The Adjustment League

Mike Barnes

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The Adjustment League is both a literary tour de force and a deft psychological thriller.

Mike Barnes's *The Adjustment League* weaves together elements of a psychological drama and a noir thriller as it follows a nameless man who feels compelled to right the wrongs inflicted on the helpless.

He's known only as the Super, tending an apartment building in a gentrifying neighborhood of Toronto. After his "Hurricane Years"—a youth and early manhood of mental storms, criminal trespasses, jail and institutions—the Super copes on his own, but he has never lost a passion for "adjustments"—rectifying the wrongs he perceives according to his peculiar moral code. However, he can do so only during "hyper-time," periods of severe mania, which are generally followed by "hyper-black," catatonic depression and episodic amnesia.

The story begins when the Super receives a note with three letters, "TAL," spurring him to trace a friend from the days when he was institutionalized. He learns that Maude Wyvern, the matriarch of a prominent family, has died. The Super believes she was left warehoused after descending into dementia, and he intends to make an "adjustment" among the Wyverns accordingly. Instead, he discovers a bizarre tale of perversion spanning two generations.

Barnes's characters fascinate, especially the Super, a damaged soul in a damaged body, who is angry yet self-aware. The Super is a brilliant man, warped by a foster-care childhood and driven by a self-inflicted personal tragedy. His obsessions lend a surrealistic air to the descriptions of people and places, and there are near-poetic descriptions within his thoughts, such as "silences rubbing against one another in endless consolation." Also interesting are the drug-addled schizophrenic daughter of the Wyvern clan, her self-aggrandizing brothers, and an autistic child in the Super's building who brings out his compassion and empathy.

The dialogue flows naturally within a narrative that tightens, flares, and grows intense with perceptive descriptions, references, and allusions. Themes of mindless consumerism, the concept of being possessed by possessions, and a deeply troubled Toronto politician all make the book more interesting.

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