

★ **The Adventurists****Richard Butner**

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Richard Butner's collection of speculative short stories *The Adventurists* includes puppeteers, a decades-old cat, and homicidal servants who operate in alternate realities. Grounded by concrete pop culture details, each strange narrative makes what's familiar seem eerie.

Here, friendships are held together by nostalgia; there are lost opportunities; and technology offers insights into the psyche. In "Adventure," a friend encounters an old buddy who trails an oxygen tank, telling a story about Death's jester, who haunts their visit. Another set of friends try out the master key that they stole in high school; they discover that their school's steam tunnels lead someplace unimaginable. Others move into a virtual reality simulation of their high school town, attending a memorial for a lost mate. Elsewhere, a tree speaks with a woman; they each work to reconcile themselves to what they see around them.

While shared histories and established intimacies give many of the stories the fodder for their central conflicts, each story, no matter how strange, is also narrated in a cool, unflappable tone. Ghosts may breeze through rooms, but the ways that they're addressed remain matter-of-fact. As a result, what's surreal in each tale glows, even when set against unkempt and dingy settings.

The book's imagined worlds keep one foot in recognizable US landscapes, with details from 1984 to the present included. The stories are grounded by band names and mentions of popular music, or by Renaissance fairs and the crisp surprise of a well-made martini. Sometimes, the past coexists with the future; at other times, what's actual mingles with what's virtual.

Strange and evocative, the short stories of *The Adventurists* skip between worlds; human regrets and foibles are centered in them, regardless of the tales' unexpected turns.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (January / February 2022)

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