



The Biographies of Ordinary People: Volume 1: 1989–2000

Nicole Dieker

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This book contains artful writing and delicately drawn characters who navigate through the universal tragedies and triumphs of everyday life.

The everyday events in Nicole Dieker's *The Biographies of Ordinary People, Vol. 1: 1989–2000* will bring back memories for many millennials and their parents. Yet this novel is anything but ordinary in the way it brings all its characters to life, making the Grubers seem like friends.

The Gruber family—Rosemary and Jack, and their daughters Meredith, Natalie, and Jackie—live in a small Missouri town, where Jack teaches music and leads the college orchestra. The volume begins when Meredith is seven and ends just after she arrives on campus as a university freshman, taking her through lazy summer days at the pool, high school's heartbreaks, and a few hard-won teenage triumphs along the way.

While Meredith is the central character, *The Biographies of Ordinary People* showcases others through its episodic structure. It offers intimate glimpses into the lives of the Grubers and their close friends. While each individual look into the characters' lives is brief, they serve as snapshots that, when viewed together, create a detailed landscape populated by well-drawn subjects. The novel's structure also makes it surprisingly fast-moving considering its relative lack of overtly dramatic events.

Indeed, the novel's pacing is deliberately leisurely, allowing characters' lives to unfold naturally. Episodes include a Christmas morning where all three Gruber girls get an American Girl doll—the last doll of Meredith's childhood—and the day a family friend excitedly introduces Meredith and his son to the Internet.

Insightful interludes into Rosemary's and Jack's lives, hopes, and dreams also give the book adult insights. Rosemary's workaday struggles to maintain her home, her family, and her sense of self come across vividly through simple moments, like laboring to make icing from scratch to impress new neighbors or indulging in a second helping of nachos, rationalizing that she'll never be thin again as middle age takes hold.

Dialogue is pitch perfect. Vignettes about trips to the video store to rent a copy of *The Three Amigos*, or the small-town ritual of riding around, harboring hopes a cute guy might buy you a frozen Coke from the gas station convenience store, also provide period-perfect details that make exchanges between characters ring even more realistically.

The Biographies of Ordinary People contains artful writing and delicately drawn characters who navigate through the universal tragedies and triumphs of everyday life. This first volume is deeply satisfying.

CHARLENE OLDHAM (April 5, 2017)

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