

The Escalator

Andrew Budden

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The Escalator is a sympathetic novel in which a peculiar family is impacted by the predicaments of an era.

In Andrew Budden's novel *Escalator*, a family's period of mourning is complicated by Brexit and a pandemic.

William was a pastor's son. Though he earned a PhD in literature, he worked in a Birmingham steel factory. When he lost that job, he also lost his mind. He began to imagine that he was the pope, among other people. And from his own multiple perspectives, he tried to answer looming conundrums at "the end of the mechanical age." He ended up living on the streets, and then he died.

William's wife, Cas, was a source of support for him and their two children, Lois and James. She worked as an accountant. Following his death, she and Lois are reflective, looking back to consider how William impacted them. Their recollections are chronological and sober.

The chapters rotate between Lois, Cas, and William's threads. Cas leaves Birmingham to grieve. Though she's always loved a confrontation, she learns to let go after years of trying to pin William down. She finds solace by the indifferent sea at Devon. Later, Lois's segments are devoted to impressions of the days surrounding her father's memorial service and her mother's death. Her children and their cousins gather, following Covid-19 protocols; she goes through her parents' belongings.

The women's short, impressionistic vignettes are a source of balance against William's endless monologues. His stream-of-consciousness thoughts flit across the weekend after his job loss, his final days, and everywhere in between. His long-winded, wandering, and associative thoughts have less direction than those of the women in his life. In his mania, he treats as serious what might otherwise be considered mad, upside down, or absurdist. He makes literary references, but they're obscure; he ruminates on pop culture, art, politics, and religion in a far-fetched manner.

As the cast cycles around each other's vantage points, they suggest a new way of seeing all together—one that's both sensible and not. The plot becomes a protracted thought experiment. It taxes, probes, and pushes the boundaries of the genre, using the family's abiding love for each other to suggest a sympathetic outlook on the world at large.

Despite his shortcomings, William's wife and daughter accept him; and his love for them endures through his estrangement. Lyrical metaphors and allusions are often present in place of their emotions, though; the pace becomes mired in its thoughtfulness, eliciting an estranged, distant mindset.

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MARI CARLSON (June 17, 2022)

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