

The Escape of Malcolm Poe

Allison Burnett

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Burnett takes the midlife crisis to a new, comedic level with the navel-gazing Malcolm Poe.

Self-delusional, snarky, and narcissistic, Malcom Poe dreams of escape from his wife, his cushy editing job, and multimillion-dollar real estate. Ten years before, he decided to leave his wife the day that his last child went to college, and he has been counting down ever since. Poe is rarely likable, but he is funny and finely wrought.

Allison Burnett, author of four other novels as well as numerous screenplays, was a finalist in fiction for the Penn Center USA Award. This novel takes the form of a journal into which Malcolm Poe pours his midlife woes: a lost child, a wife he no longer loves but is still willing to have sex with, children who don't particularly like or respect him, a job he does not find satisfying. Even more, it is the loss of his youthful dreams of writing and his imagined artistic integrity that he bemoans. He alleges to want the grit of real life: perhaps, a smaller apartment? He makes plans: "Instead of immersing myself in all the works of a single author, as I did in my youth, I will gather around me a variety of books and delve in to each only until my interests flags. Then I will move on to the next. This way my imagination will be teased, wooed, and stoked but never dominated."

Poe wants to be the beloved, the center, the coddled. When the novel begins, he is divesting himself of the trappings of his life in anticipation of his youngest's admission to college, then he will leave.

What shines here is the voice. Poe misbehaves with abandon, all with a sense of self-righteousness. He sails through his life rationalizing every wrongdoing as another way that he was victimized. When he does take the blame, it is grandiose—a kind of self-flagellation with hair shirt. He is grotesque comedic theater, moving from a high-profile editing job to a short-lived stint at a suicide hotline.

Still, the novel is not all comic. Poe is suffering as a parent who has lost a child and as a parent suddenly aware that his children do not view him in a way that he would like. Beneath the bravado of Poe's voice, Burnett has found the heart of the character as well.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (Winter 2015)

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