

The Escapist

David Puretz

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The Escapist is a stunning novel about a damaged man.

In David Puretz's unforgettable novel *The Escapist*, a troubled young man is haunted by childhood trauma.

Twenty-one-year-old Billy can't keep a job or a girlfriend. He's become adept at managing his mercurial mental state through the careful self-administration of pharmaceuticals and illegal drugs, yet they only provide brief, transient respite. In search of a cure for his problems, he embarks on a quest inspired by a journal entry he made during a combined-drug high: "Find Dad."

Billy's father is an Iraq veteran who's missing, on purpose, somewhere in the United States. He abused Billy as a child, and Billy associates finding him with salvation, hoping it will offer the chance to lay his troubled past to rest. The quest becomes Billy's *raison d'être*. As a result of his single-minded focus and addictions, he pushes aside a promising relationship with Nicole, a flight attendant, and finds what could be a genuine connection with Bryan, a hiker who convinces Billy to join him on the Appalachian Trail and who is bound for New York with a life-altering mission that influences Billy's own. Billy's unsuccessful attempts at finding love during his quest add another layer of despair to his troubles.

Billy's father is a distant presence throughout the story, the mysteries around him penetrated only as far as Billy's understandings permit. Other characters are brought to life through minor details and mannerisms, as with the love, concern, weariness, and irritation that Billy's brother demonstrates. Conversations are authentic and insightful, capturing characters' mental states: a woman breaks up with Billy by saying "I'm not dating no criminal." Indelible images, as with Billy's recollections of his abusive father's "long octopus arms," evoke a powerful sense of Billy's torment.

Telling bits of backstory are parceled out in Billy's journal, in conversation, and through Billy's behavior, piecing the mystery of his past together in a painstaking way, while the inclusion of real-world events—including the Occupy Wall Street movement, which plays a major role in the harrowing final scenes—makes it more authentic. A surprising, satisfying conclusion follows Billy's internal logic with a natural summation of events.

A close, fascinating view of a wild, self-destructive ride, Billy's story careens toward a memorable end. *The Escapist* is a stunning novel about a damaged man.

PETER DABBENE (January 8, 2020)

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