



The Griefmaker

George Gurley

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*Set in a small Midwestern town, the novel *The Griefmaker* follows two men through their family trials.*

In George Gurley's novel *The Griefmaker*, a small town is polarized over plans for the local land.

The Tenbrooks once owned a thousand acres of Kansas prairie land—space dubbed the Griefmaker. They lost their land because of bankruptcy, though. Now, Henry Tenbrook, who works as an appraiser for a preservationist group, is roiled by his clashes with Everett, a former classmate of his whose prominent family now owns the former Tenbrook estate. Everett has plans to develop that land—plans that Henry hopes to stop. Both men believe that their aims are crucial to finding personal meaning in their midlives.

The novel's inciting conflicts—between personal histories, rare and teeming ecologies, and commercial progress—are fascinating. But these outward circumstances belie the full truth about the central men. Everett is unfussy about his wealth, and has limited influence within his own home: his rebellious son one-ups him during their verbal sparring, and his religious wife is also a philanderer. And Henry is less of a crusader than he is an unlucky man who fears being seen as inadequate. This impacts his marriage, leading him to engage in a dangerous entanglement with a former classmate whom he and Everett once bullied.

Beyond Henry and Everett, the farm town's colorful secondary cast includes a preacher who doesn't believe in God, a volunteer fire crew, and panhandlers. Collectively, they become emblematic of an intriguing subset of Kansas life, featuring the town's local cross section of heartland archetypes and newcomers. As the former mix with Henry and Everett, interesting facets of each person are revealed.

Humor propels the book's first half. Misunderstandings between men and women spur people toward self-reflection; Henry searches for solutions to his anxieties. Henry also proves to be an entertaining observer whose attempts at country living lead him to frequent mishaps. Further, the story follows as fathers' relationships with their children change: they stop feeling capable of guiding their children, resulting in awkwardness and bewilderment. Beyond this, the interests of those who fall on either side of the argument related to the Griefmaker's fate initiate a quirky protest that includes a poetry recitation and local pole dancers. The novel comes to seem satirical as it surveys the cast's emotional ties to the land: people's foibles are emphasized throughout, helping to pull the disparate story lines together.

But this sense of focus wanes in the book's second half: at Everett's invitation, Henry joins a party at an island vacation home, where Everett's insecurities burst forth and then fade. Peeks into people's excessive behavior combine with revenge schemes and treatments of religion; the novel meanders toward its ending, becoming episodic. Its ending is hasty as well.

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KAREN RIGBY (June 23, 2022)

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