



The Out-of-Sorts

Gary Fincke

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These stories offer a vivid glimpse of the lives of Rust Belt inhabitants.

“Everything with a beating heart knows when aloneness has come to stay,” says a married woman living above the burning core of Centralia, Pennsylvania. She might as well be speaking to the many broken and breaking characters in this collection of new and selected stories. Unsparring, stark, and finely crafted, Gary Fincke’s prose evokes a Rust Belt living through its own collapse, articulated by its inhabitants in dialogue that closely echoes the rural places that rarely make the news.

Fincke writes about a young woman forced to threaten an intruder with a shotgun, a man intent on enlisting his stepson in a money-making crime, a mother who drowns her child, a husband who can’t see to drive in the dark, and a wife who believes the road to be full of bodies waiting to be found.

Dark and unsettling, many of these stories explore the way men view women and the impact that has on relationships, from the romantic to the paternal. Fincke writes across genders with ease, creating believable characters of both sexes and across age brackets, though his characters are almost all working-class.

These twenty-three stories often rely on dialogue for both characterization and exposition, but Fincke’s carefully tuned ear brings life to even the harshest of thoughts. Setting becomes an essential part of many stories, creating solitude for characters in which they can become both threatened or threatening in turn, from a serial killer with buried bodies to a group of women parking together outside the mall. Few feel safe, and those who do often correlate safe with stuck.

This is no elegy to brutal places. Instead, Fincke writes characters who observe, trying to understand the thinking that might set a man to killing his ex-wife or a teenage girl to drinking Drano. Finely drawn, swiftly paced, and authentically voiced, these stories offer a vivid glimpse of the lives behind the windows of boarded-up towns and houses set back from the road.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (November/December 2017)

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