

The Policy

c.i. downs

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This vibrant story of unfailing love concerns itself with one man's struggle for workplace dignity.

C. I. Downs's powerful novel *The Policy* is the story of a young father's desperate love for his child and of his battle to achieve justice for his fellow workers, who are caught in a system where the odds are stacked against them.

Canadian steelworker Rory Gunn is simply trying to provide for himself and his five-year-old mentally disabled daughter, Anna. Though his job pays reasonably well, the working conditions can be brutal; twelve-hour shifts, decrepit facilities, shoddy compliance with safety policies, old equipment, summer heat that turns the workplace into an oven, and the constant fear of retaliation for complaints are all facts of life at the plant. As his coworkers struggle to unionize, he finds himself thrust into a leadership role.

Rory is well liked and respected by his fellow workers, but he is also emotionally and physically exhausted from overwork and the stress of caregiving. A sensitive, philosophical man, he is at first reluctant to assume his leadership position. When he does, he learns hard truths that rip him from his fragile moorings and put him, and those he loves, in danger.

Insightful, intense, and timely, *The Policy* dives deeply into issues that affect workers and their families. Downs's narrative skillfully handles the overall lack of respect accorded to workers by management, including the lack of adequate childcare and the stress that imposes on working parents; workplace dangers; and the effects of long-term stress and sleep deprivation on a person's well-being.

The gritty nature of the tale necessitates strong language to convey the stink, sweat, and frustration of the workers' lives but requires a gentler touch in scenes filled with tender love. Downs's language succeeds on both fronts, and his prose is unfailingly beautiful. In one scene, Rory is shown sitting at a bar, "drifting between contemplation and complete vacancy," taking comfort in his "two ounces of smoky single malt on ice," feeling a little dizzy from the drink after "working a long day that lapped into the night."

The pacing is brisk when appropriate, and the character development is full and rich, with perfect amounts of time devoted to bringing out each character's salient traits. Also vivid are the descriptions of the steel plant, the jobs the workers do, and the machinery they use. Emotional states are brought to life, and the characters' inner worlds are vividly and sympathetically rendered.

The Policy is a vibrant story of unfailing love. In a world in which the present may be unbearable and the future uncertain, Downs has pointed to the heart as a sure compass.

KRISTINE MORRIS (September 15, 2016)

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