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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ LGBT FICTION

The Queerling

Austin Gary
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Gary is at the height of his literary powers, producing a character and a story that feels viscerally authentic long after the reality-bending conclusion.

Having declared his pen name "Oskar Caulfield," the character Preston Nesbitt combines the keenly blunt, self-congratulatory observations of literary loner persona Holden Caulfield with recognition of the situation he's in: a modern-day version of Oskar Matzerath's reality. Author Austin Gary's ability to create the illusion of haphazardly digressive monologues while weaving a complexly layered, cohesive story of a life makes this book a standout.

Preston's psychiatrist has known him for years, diagnosing him with Asperger's syndrome at the tender age of eight. A decade later, Preston is obliged to produce a daily journal for his doctor's perusal. *The Queerling* is generally written on three topics: Preston's indictment of society and its various constructs; careful dissection of the psychological problems of Preston's cohorts at "The Healing Place" (an inpatient psychiatric facility); and a progressively revealing autobiography. While it is true that Preston claims to be bisexual (and proudly claims the epithet "queerling"), the focus is far from Preston's sexual queerness.

The story is brilliant, esoteric fiction. The world-building Gary has engaged in consists of the lives of those surrounding his main character, past and present, since all action occurs in the controlled environment of the inpatient facility, in the journal itself (via direct communication between the psychiatrist and Preston), and in Preston's memories. Memories and dreams occupy the same temporal plane as any other reality, such as his present. For example, Preston offers approximately the same attention to his deadbeat, but financially successful, father as to deconstructing the lives of any of his companions at The Healing Place, but he finds it just as important to discuss proud moments from his childhood in his journal.

Preston's particular savant characteristics allow him a generously well-developed theory of mind and strong central coherence (the ability to understand others, combined with the ability to see the big picture) along with a perfect memory and perfectly believable, off-the-charts genius; these are a fantastic combination of attributes in the narrative. Sardonic, cultural reference-heavy humor and emotion-laden memories appear in equal measure. The story remains fun to read while also requiring a considerable amount of intellectual and emotional energy.

There are moments when Preston slows down after discussing serious issues, though the mood is still humorous. Following biographies of his parents' rather dysfunctional lives, he announces: "Not up to writing today. Exhuming Family Skeletons was a downer. Is it possible I was adopted? Did I, perchance, escape from a hole in the wallpaper, or emerge from an alien starseed? Any of these origins would be more comforting."

The truth about Preston is that no one understands him, not that he is desperately in need of medication. Thematically, overmedication of modern American youth is hammered home, though not precipitously. Preston means well, often trying to help those around him, only to be foiled in the attempt by his off-putting genius. Poor Preston seems to say the wrong thing every time—or is it that he happens to be right about others so often?

The generous foreshadowing notwithstanding, the epilogue will blow readers' minds and beg a second reading to revisit missed details. Gary is at the height of his literary powers, producing a character and a story that feels viscerally authentic long after the reality-bending conclusion.

CARRIE WALLACE (October 7, 2013)

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