

The Rise and Fall of the Scandamerican Domestic

Christopher Merkner

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Sharing the seemingly ordinary setting of the Midwest, these short stories turn simple and normal into weird, melancholy, and wonderful.

Christopher Merkner has a deeply weird sensibility, and it makes his short fiction a pleasure to read. In *The Rise and Fall of the Scandamerican Domestic*, Merkner crafts creative tales that heighten the Midwestern experience into something unique. The stories range from darkly comic to genuinely sad, to more than a bit unsettling. But all share a strong voice and a seemingly ordinary setting, and they all exhibit the author's ability to keep his work in the realm of plausibility.

"Time in Norrmalmstorg" is a perfect example and one of the strongest stories in the collection. It begins with a father taking his children to a particularly unruly kiddie birthday party. The experience of watching their peers beat a piñata inspires the children just enough to cause problems, which then escalate further, until the father of the birthday boy has attempted to kill the narrator. The whole thing is told in perfectly paced understatement, dark and absurd in equal measure. In one paragraph, the story's perfect deadpan delivery goes from "I call him the name for male genitalia and ask if he'd like his lessons over the phone or in person" to "I remember going over to him, facing him, and then coming home in a police car."

Merkner writes with a style that takes deceptively simple ideas and builds complete, engaging stories around the premise. The lines "It's very hard to lie to children. It's also very easy" set up a story about parents trying to compensate for their fears about their child falling behind in school by sending him to a language teacher, only to play out a marital conflict through that decision. "In Lapland" uses the painting of a house as a metaphor for the work involved in a couple's marriage, with the knowing, straight-faced reactions of neighbors adding the right amount of comedy to a story that could have turned too sad.

Perhaps the strangest piece is the opening story, "Of Pigs and Children," in which a man tries to confess an accidental killing to his mother while holding her pet pig and cycling through a range of disturbing emotions in the process. All these stories are written with a distinct voice that holds the collection together and makes each piece worth reading.

JEFF FLEISCHER (Winter 2014)

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