



The Weight of Nothing

Steven Gillis

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Clean-slatedness is a state of mind; “a unique method that allows the patient to reconnect in short order with the sine qua non of their soul while ridding the mind of all that is harmful and foul.” When this novel’s protagonist, Bailey Finne, tries to achieve a mental clean slate, he does not attain the expected result. Instead, he finds that he must embrace life in its entirety; the good and the bad.

The author’s tale is one of philosophical angst and emotional discovery. On another level, the book has a fascinating plot that weaves together the lives of Bailey Finne, a talented musician whose life is characterized by inertia, and his friend Niles Kelly, who eschews his wealthy background for a woman he ultimately loses. Gillis’s story enmeshes the secondary characters in the spheres of personal connection of these two men, to create a highly engaging and moving tale of friends who are transformed by tragedy.

Gillis’s first novel, *Walter Falls*, was a finalist for the Independent Publishers Association 2004 Book of the Year Award for General Fiction. Here, he presents a fascinating cast of characters, each flawed and conflicted in some way. These include Oz, the terrorist who acts upon his deep hatred for America but who nevertheless maintains a genuine friendship with Tyler, an American soldier; and Liz, Bailey’s attractive and talented pianist girlfriend, who lost her arm at the pinnacle of her career in a savage dog attack.

The story ends on a positive note for Bailey after he breaks through the psychological barrier of his past, and attains a higher degree of emotional enlightenment. Despite the protagonist’s progress, the rest of novel is characterized by deep sadness and tragedy, beginning with the death of Bailey’s mother when he is just a boy. The novel goes on to recount a litany of cruel misfortune befalling all the characters, most poignantly, the terrible loss that Niles suffers when his fiancée is killed, and his own subsequent demise, slow and torturous, mile-posted by somnambulistic episodes of self-harm.

Gillis skillfully manages to avoid unforgiving bleakness by investing the tragedy with a transforming quality. By the end of the novel, Bailey is ready to confront the meaninglessness of existence yet continue living: “While I forgot nothing, I drew differently from each experience and the weight of that which still had to be endured.”

LARA WILLIAMS (August 18, 2009)

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