

**to be to is to was****Stephen C. Bird**

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*to be to is to was is an anti-establishment collection of stories that goes from real to surreal, from Middle America to space rock operas, with its outrageous characters.*

Stephen C. Bird's collection of short stories and vignettes *to be to is to was* is set in a parallel universe, in places that function as a fun house mirror of our own world. The stories' settings and characters are sometimes familiar, but many have funny new names. Some are exaggerated grotesques. Distasteful places and outrageous people are described with relish; the boring sameness of the suburbs and common taste is exaggerated.

Here, McMansions are like sets for horror films, and tacky homes with "department store lamps" are criticized more than once. Proper nouns are treated with punny but jaded new names: Fox News-types are "Evilangelists" from the "Buy-Bull Belt" or the "Fartland." Hippies, too, have their philosophies and tie-dyed T-shirts mocked, especially in the funny "Life on Planet Gorp," where conflicts over trail mix are mediated by a leader named Anna Thesia.

There are unexpected forms throughout the book, including poems, lyrics, and many long speeches that are given by characters. The short, surreal first story, "Father and Son Cross the Bridge," is lovely and visual. In the sort-of fairy tale that follows, "Sunny Deelite Comes of Age," wide-eyed Sunnie leaves small-town New York in search of a gay community in California and meets two leathermen who are like a pair of fairy godmothers to him. These first two stories seem to function apart from the flamboyant women's stories that populate most of the rest of the book.

Women in the book fit types, though they sometimes change between types—like a good girl, her bad girl alter ego, and the lovelorn rock star who transforms to deliver soliloquies in "the lazy, syrupy drawl of a neo-Nazi, Tea Party gal." A stock Southern accent is employed with frequency, and some lines—such as one that states that people of one imagined place are "innately mentally superior" to those of another country—are polarizing. Many stories are more talk than action.

In "The Ultimate Contest," characters show up for an intergalactic boxing match; the story is more about the emcee announcing them than it is about the fight, which is summed up in one anticlimactic paragraph. Pop culture references abound but to unclear ends, as when someone's outfit is described as "a hybrid of *Dune*, Mary Poppins, and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*"—an intriguing image that bears, but does not receive, further exploration. Some details—genitals on faces, for example—seem included for shock value more than anything else. Ellipses are used to excess.

*to be to is to was* is an anti-establishment collection of stories that goes from real to surreal, from Middle America to space rock operas, with its outrageous characters whose caustic wordplay skewers boring American consumerism.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (January 16, 2019)

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