ForeWord Reviews

LITERARY

Toward You
Jim Krusoe
Tin House Books
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A cursing dog, a rosebush that channels the dead, an eight-year-old rabies victim and a man who looks strangely like a capybara all collide—together with a multitude of baked goods—in Jim Krusoe's smart and witty tale of revenge, longing, and the connections forged between souls in this world and the afterlife.

The book tells the story of Bob, a self-employed upholsterer in St. Nils (also the setting of Krusoe's two previous novels) who has been tinkering for years with the Communicator, a device he believes that—once built—will allow him to talk to the dead. He's spurred to finish the contraption after a message-bearing dog and an old girlfriend enter his life. Krusoe starts the probing forthwith, separating the world of the living and the dead with a thin, almost porous membrane, as if the touch of a moist fingertip would make it dissolve. A tennis ball tossed in the afterlife ends up near Bob's rosebush; both Bob and Dee Dee, the eight-year-old girl stuck in a sort of afterlife limbo, liken the voices of the dead to the roar of Niagara Falls.

Krusoe excels at crafting quirky, fascinating characters. Bob's ex-girlfriend Yvonne writes disjointed haiku on napkins during her job as a cocktail waitress at an Indian casino. Steadman, a police officer who looks as though someone "had grabbed him by his ears and pulled backward very, very hard," relishes long philosophical discussions and easy listening music. Bob, constantly interrupted by unannounced company, has an endless supply of fennel-scented cake, gingerbread, cookies, and other baked goodies at the ready for his guests.

When it comes to describing the hereafter, Krusoe's Dee Dee creates a colorful chaos in the mind's eye: "The color here: white white white with just a little bit of yellow-gray. The sound: a really high-pitched whine that only bothers me when I listen hard for it. The sense of touch: forget it. The taste: salty, I think, and a little on the sweet side. The smell: a big surprise—the slight odor of gasoline, mixed with Lysol Spring Garden Scent room freshener, the kind my mother used to buy, with just a touch of burnt toast…"

Krusoe teaches creative writing at Santa Monica College and has authored five books of poetry, a collection of short stories, and three previous novels. A masterful writer, he keeps the

dialogue crisp and spot-on. Fans of magical realism will relish a nighttime scene in the police house where officers sip hot chocolate and carry plates of brownies, colorful pillows and fresh-cut flowers provide atmosphere, and some of St. Nils's finest read bedtime stories to inmates. Fans of dry humor will appreciate the many sly jokes Krusoe tucks into the pages.

Revenge, the consequences of our actions, hope, and our intrinsically selfish natures are all explored in this thought-provoking book. Readers drawn to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Douglas Adams will enjoy the novel for its fantastical elements, dark undercurrents, and flashes of wry wit. It's a funny, quirky, darkly fascinating tale told with the skill of a wordsmith and the soul of a poet.

Dana Rae Laverty