

Upon This Pale Hill

Patrick Ashe

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Upon This Pale Hill is a meditative novel that layers spiritual musings on top of millennial angst.

In Patrick Ashe's intriguing coming-of-age novel *Upon This Pale Hill*, a philosophical young man hopes to make sense of his life.

Brandon is about to graduate from college, where he spends his time with both campus progressives and capitalists. The realities of student loans and finding a job sink in, but he's an idealist, and he wants to be a force for good in the world. He hopes that he can live up to his ideals, and help to bring about a just economy and fight for equality. But life after college disappoints his expectations. Soulless networking schemes, digital applications, and hundreds of computerized rejections meet him.

Like a good student, Brandon cycles through his previous understandings of how the world works, meditating on Marx's economic concepts and Søren Kierkegaard's religious ideas. He meets Janelle online and begins a long-distance love affair that seems doomed from the start. He keeps trying to land jobs and ends up back at home with his overbearing parents. A longtime friends' hedonistic ways rankle him, as do other people's insufferable certainties about how to live. Circumstances combine and conflict with his growing sense that there is more to life than pat answers. His internal musings lead into spiritual territory, though the more Brandon philosophizes, the more confused and despondent he becomes.

The book's supporting characters are one-tone: a girl on campus is present to show that it's easy to offend progressive sensibilities, while Brandon's father spends much of his page time yelling. Likewise, the campus capitalists are positioned as jerks, and Brandon's first boss as an obnoxious person. Most are more symbolic than they are realistic, and their conversations involve theological and philosophical exchanges with textbook flavors. The mysterious Aisling and the Morning Star, who both are mentioned a handful of times and who help and hinder Brandon's progress, are the most intriguing, though they are fleeting presences who only speak a few lines each.

Beautiful descriptions, as of "two shadows" that cut across the "foundation of a hilltop house, cast away from the setting sun," arise, and the novel's Southern backdrop features poverty and evidence of hope. Eventually, Brandon is forced to make a significant choice, adding a sense of weight to his floundering.

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JEREMIAH ROOD (June 17, 2020)

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