

Welcome to the Goat Rodeo

Tom Barlow

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Welcome to the Goat Rodeo, by Tom Barlow, is a collection of more than a dozen highly inventive short stories. While each is stunning and original, they all explore the limits of human relationships—and all the tension, earnestness, and miscommunication therein.

Barlow is well versed in the intricacies of the short-story genre. He creates situations and characters that are at once realistic and bizarre: A man struggling with anger toward a woman by mutilating a snowman; a man drowning in the literal water of his grief; siblings searching the hoarder-father's home for a birth certificate, only to find that their relationship isn't what they thought. The title gives a sense of the stories' peculiar characters, settings, and themes.

Barlow's dialogue has the cadence and colloquialism of real speech, without belaboring the reading experience: "Patel wiped his forehead with a railroad bandana. 'I heard about your dad.' 'Yeah. We're burying him tomorrow.' 'I won't be there; you know why. But I'm sorry. For you and your sister and your mom.'" Most of the stories are in the vicinity of twenty pages, though some are much shorter.

The title and the odd situations that the stories portray give the impression that this will be a humorous book, and in some ways it is. But Barlow's stories traverse such deep, psychological ground that they dredge up more existential despair than laughter. By eschewing the easy laughs, Barlow gives readers a deeper insight into the human condition. As a result, the stories will stick in readers' minds, allowing rumination to continue well after the book is closed. The title story closes the book and follows a man as he waits for death and tries to negotiate its terms alongside input from his daughters and his memories of his wife. The book closes with his words, which befit the book as a whole: "He didn't find dying so very easy, though. When he returned from the doctor, he spent the rest of the day not putting on his shoes. Not walking down to the bodega. Not buying a pack of butts. Not smoking. Waiting for it all to get better."

Welcome to the Goat Rodeo is quick but weighty.

MELISSA WUSKE (Winter 2014)

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