



White Man's Problems

Kevin Morris

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These clear-eyed morality tales showcase lightheartedness and angst in equal measure.

In nine contemporary stories bouncing between nouveau riche Los Angeles and the working-class East Coast, Kevin Morris explores the gray areas of modern life. His believable characters self-consciously grapple with both technology and postmodern cynicism, trying to be good men and not fail their children, “at once living the whiteness and watching it.” White man’s problems these may be, but Morris’s themes feel universal in scope.

Whether looking for creative ways to let off steam after a day in court or enduring chaperone duties on a school field trip to the nation’s capital, these average men are simultaneously nothing special and the heroes of their own ordinary lives. Four stories highlight ruthless lawyers who strive to balance family obligations or higher purposes with their professional ambition. Morris is the managing partner of an LA entertainment law firm and coproduced the recent hit musical *The Book of Mormon*, so he knows the cutthroat milieu of both Hollywood and the law firsthand.

“Mulligan’s Travels,” the central story, is the best example of the book’s preoccupations. At fifty, Jim has made millions from ATM technology, but remains disillusioned: “This was not supposed to be his life.” He might have been a football star, but instead is a conventional family man caught in everyday ethical dilemmas: Is it wrong to employ an illegal immigrant as a housekeeper? As a newly moneyed Californian, does he fit into liberal, hipster culture? In a wonderful narrative surprise, it is the family bulldog who reminds this technology-obsessed modern man that flesh-and-blood reality trumps the virtual world.

“The Plot to Hold Hands with Elizabeth Tremblay” is related by a delightfully irascible student who resents the indignities of his 1970s high school life. Here, especially, Morris echoes the wry voice of suburbia found in Tom Perrotta’s work. Likewise, “Here Comes Mike,” tracing the legend of a Philadelphia basketball phenomenon over four decades, stands out for its dialogue: a triumph of regional, working-class slang. Though in some ways the least typical story, “Rain Come Down” has the most virtuoso style. Stream-of-consciousness passages capture the perspective of a woman with dementia: “You’re up high like a car. Fresh air little nip in it but nice riding with warm John.”

Morris elevates his characters’ struggles through literary allusions, even beginning, in a tip of the hat to existentialism, with an epigraph from Camus. “Mulligan’s Travels” references both Swift and Cervantes (what with Jim’s constant battle against “technological windmills”); secondary characters are named for Robert Browning and Oscar Wilde (and Scarlett for an illegitimate child evokes *The Scarlet Letter*); and “we had not set out from Ithaca...to end up with snivelers” recalls Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Throughout, the stories contain strong characterization and convincing dialogue. A fine addition to the postmodern literature of suburban angst, this collection is perfect for fans of Perrotta, Andre Dubus III, and Jim Gavin.

REBECCA FOSTER (May 5, 2014)

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