



Birch: Mind of the Dragonflies

Jon P. Roth

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Dangers are afoot in the technology sector, but two heroes are determined to curb them in the imaginative, inspiring science fiction novel Birch.

In Jon P. Roth's futuristic novel *Birch*, a computer hacker melds his coding skills with his observations on nature.

Graduated and working, best friends Birch and Angel stop making the college prank information-snatch-and-share computer programs that they know could get them in trouble. But as they question the violent video games and surveillance drones they each develop in exchange for substantial compensation in Silicon Valley, they begin to use their college creation as a secret means of communicating. Together, working undercover, they reprogram the drones into goodwill agents.

Birch and Angel narrate alternating chapters. While Birch gives up his possessions and rides a motorcycle to an unknown destination, cutting all ties to his video game job, Angel gets paid more and more and is more he is swept into the insatiable culture he once complained about. And programming drones are just a fraction of the world domination his company plans: Angel's boss threatens him and others; there are acts of retaliation and torture. The pressure Angel operates under explains Birch's escape, and Birch's escape appears all the more impressive and implausible as Angel succumbs to pressure.

Birch's chapters become more introspective the longer he is away. He contemplates how to apply the values he learns in the countryside to coding. He shares his story with a woman he learns to trust, engages in physical labor, and consumes less. He is philosophical and sometimes meanders. Meanwhile, Angel's chapters become more succinct as his job leaves little room for reflection. He and his wife see each other less often; she becomes suspicious of him.

Friends and colleagues who represent the social extremes of city and country, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, Angel and Birch are standout heroes who each require the other's support. Though opposites, they present a united front. Their enemies are everyone's enemies and their supporters are everyone's loved ones.

The men's different settings also highlight their growing divide. Angel is surrounded by luxury items, while Birch makes a rustic home. Toggling between their two lifestyles, the book achieves balance, though it does tip toward Birch in the end. His musings gain traction when Angel invites him to undermine the drones, leading to a satisfying resolution.

In the science fiction novel *Birch*, clever, mindful technology workers help to plan a better future.

MARI CARLSON (October 24, 2024)

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