

Black Days

Jackson Ellis

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In Jackson Ellis's provocative science fiction novel *Black Days*, a despondent Vermont man's inspired plan leads to disaster, raising questions about the consequences of unchecked human ambition.

Daniel is divorced, unemployed, and reeling from the effects of a recent car accident. A close encounter with a bear inspires an "insane idea" that he can't resist: he wants to spend the winter in hibernation. Daniel's friend Dr. Butcher is tantalized and certain he can pull it off. When word gets out about Daniel's successful hibernation, he and Dr. Butcher are deluged with applications from hibernation aspirants, including the town pariah, a convicted child rapist. They begin running a hibernation business out of a shed in Daniel's backyard. However, a conflict between Daniel and the doctor endangers the lives of one of the patients.

The novel confronts challenging issues, such as the question of whether perpetrators of heinous crimes can earn forgiveness. It unfolds with deliberateness and is somewhat sluggish until about three-quarters of the way through, when one character pulls a gun on another, leading to a foot chase and a deus ex machina ending featuring the arrival of a person who had been referenced but never seen.

At first self-pitying to the point of being intolerable, Daniel transforms after his hibernation into a more hopeful and assertive person. His sensitivity is appealing when applied to others; he even finds empathy for someone when others cannot. Dr. Butcher undergoes a transformation of his own, from kind country doctor to someone galvanized by success. The friction between the two characters is compelling.

A Vermont man and a doctor team up on a scientific experiment that triggers disastrous results in *Black Days*, an arresting science fiction novel.

DAVID BUSHMAN (November / December 2024)

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