

## Deep Fried

**Mark Doyon**

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*Consequential connections form among the denizens of a food truck lot in the intriguing novel Deep Fried.*

A food truck lot just outside of a county courthouse serves as the primary setting of Mark Doyon's polyphonic novel *Deep Fried*.

Over the course of a year, starting in May of 2014, various dramas are enacted by a motley crew that serves as a microcosm of their community near Washington, DC. Their distinct, diverse voices command the short, snappy chapters they narrate in turn. Across lines of gender, age, and origin, their points of view are convincing and rendered with skill.

Among the cast are Indian-born Arjun, a cheerful and philosophical young entrepreneur who runs Bollywood Eggrolls; former lawyer Melinda, a single mother and the purveyor of gourmet hamburgers via Burger Bombs; Antwaan nee Antoine, who bemoans his life of privilege while aspiring to a career in rap music; Eddie, a shell-shocked Vietnam veteran with a hot dog cart; Jared, who is developing an app that could help them all while popping antidepressants and living in his car; and Candy, a pretty but tough young woman with poor taste in men who is fired from her job as a telemarketer after being sexually harassed by her boss. Billy, who works at Walgreens and plays in a band, pines for Candy after first seeing her in the store, and Melinda's teenage daughter Aubrey rounds out the cast. In addition to the human characters, there are also whimsical contributions from a Lincoln penny wedged in the sidewalk, the statue of George Wythe (mentor and teacher to Thomas Jefferson), and a pigeon with heroic ambitions.

Told in bite-sized pieces, the novel moves with sometimes dizzying speed. Although the vignettes serve character development more than plot propulsion at first, as the chapters accrue, a more cohesive story emerges. Soon, the web of connections between the characters becomes evident, with the developing relationship between Candy and Arjun providing a loose framework for the whole.

In the beginning, Candy is Arjun's customer, sampling his specialty, a curry-filled egg roll, while telling him about her troubles with her boyfriend Bobby. Their exchanges unspool in entertaining passages in which Candy advises Arjun on his menu and they share their dreams. As time passes and both experience life-changing traumas, their mutual attraction evolves into a partnership.

Another significant relationship is the one between Melinda and Arjun, whom she sees as her rival. Melinda comes up with the idea for a Gourmet Battle of the Vans, aspiring to increase their business. While her desire to outperform Arjun and to cast Jared from the lot makes her seem something of a villain, she is humanized by her angst over her troubled daughter Aubrey, who has taken to cutting herself. The characters' various plans and preparations for the competition are the story's true source of momentum, though. These lead to the climactic penultimate event, where everyone comes together and the threads are tied up in a satisfying way.

Written with verve and originality, *Deep Fried* is a hunger-inducing novel revolving around the dramas of a food truck

lot.

SUZANNE KAMATA (August 28, 2024)

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