



Delinquents and Other Escape Attempts

Nick Rees Gardner

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Nick Rees Gardner's scathing short story collection captures lives of not-so-quiet desperation in the Rust Belt.

These linked stories vivify Westinghouse, Ohio, an imaginary depressed Midwestern town wherein some people's only options seem to be "rehab, death or prison." Most people try to escape, often through drink and drugs. Youth who feel that they are just passing through fail to realize that their Midwest home will be fine without them.

There are haunting but humorous tales of substance abuse, recovery, efforts to leave, and fantasies about starting new lives throughout. In "Sever the Head," an alcoholic winery employee tries to get clean; in a memorable scene, an octopus is decapitated. "Orange Pill, Yellow Wrangler" chronicles a descent into heroin addiction in harrowing detail. And in the poignant entry "Delinquents," a scrap metal rocket ship is crafted out of a person's "drive to vanish in the firmament."

The stories are suffused with a palpable sense of place that's complemented by a hand-drawn map with a legend of Westinghouse's landmarks. And the prose is alliterative and earthy, making use of streetwise analogies that ground it in realism. Westinghouse residents have to watch out for "American Gangstering" and try not to be buzzkilled" or "smithereened." Keen insights on drug use, addiction, and recovery are included, too: someone who used to swill drink from a hip flask and take edibles "now call[s] movies films"; another person gulps "down airplane bottles of Sutter Home over ice to stop the shakes"; and someone marvels over how soft the bed feels in rehabilitation.

In the scintillating short story collection *Delinquents and Other Escape Attempts*, small-town residents flirt with escapism from feelings of brokenness, searching for more beyond their hardscrabble existence.

JOSEPH S. PETE (July / August 2024)

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