

Down Along the Piney: Ozarks Stories

John Mort

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The men in John Mort's collection, *Down Along the Piney*, are bent on doing, working through it, and putting up with it, with all the hard words and hard ways that characterize hardscrabble life in the Ozarks. These stories, stark and relentless, often center on masculinity and fathers, with men and women searching for father figures, running from them, and becoming them.

In the Ozarks of this book, there are few jobs. Industrial farming killed all the family farms, meth addiction has destroyed communities, and many people are ready to succumb to any savior they can afford, whether it be God, drugs, alcohol, or books.

In the longest story, "Top," a lonely old soldier creates his own New Jerusalem, where people give all their worldly goods in exchange for work, food, housing, and Top's guidance. When Top brings Birdy Blevins to live in his strange utopia, the young man finds a sudden and dangerous purpose that puts the whole community at risk.

In "Red Rock Place," a son sends his father peacefully into death on the back of a Western fairy tale. In another story, a Mexican father brings his American-born daughter to his homeland only to discover that in Mexico, she has no home. In still other stories, PTSD profoundly affects characters, their families, and their prospects.

Characters' focus is on the doing of things. Profoundly able as fix-it men, they conquer reluctant engines, re-chink log walls, hammer roofs, sand and plane logs. Though many can't see a future in front of them, they can identify the problem of the moment. They get to hide or get lost in those immediacies until choices are simply gone.

Honest and sometimes hopeless, these stories offer haunting perspectives on poverty, post-military life, and American masculinity.

CAMILLE-YVETTE WELSCH (University Press 2018)

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