

Down and Out in a Doublewide: And Other Tales of Modern Life

Anthony Scavillo

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Down and Out in a Doublewide is an entertaining collection of short stories about thwarted ideals and indelible incidents in the lives of everyday people.

Anthony Scavillo's short story collection explores permutations of the American dream, from disenchantment to macabre twists and occasional reprieves.

The book's early stories are swift and focus on people's inward musings. In them, a recent high school graduate anticipates a trip to Paris with her friends—but their flight is disrupted. A man and woman who met online worry about what each other think and wonder whether they'll meet again. Elsewhere, a multivoiced story features third graders with varied home lives that differ in their levels of neglect. Hope is a recurrent theme: people desire what is good, even when their circumstances change. The entries' brusque conclusions, though, keep full satisfaction at bay.

Other stories in the collection are about loss, chance encounters, and men whose minor confrontations escalate: a car accident leads to further danger, a letter from the IRS fuels comical anxiety, and a clergyman's preoccupation with himself causes him to miss the chance to help someone in need. Herein, people are manipulated; the sketches that feature them rely on twists and are not always empathetic (their weaknesses become fodder for the audience's amusement). Growth is foregone in favor of punchlines, as when a naïve person voices her desire that her life might change into "a Disneyesque, happy dream."

Amid the disparate entries, "Down and Out in a Doublewide" stands out for adding continuity through mentions of previous characters. But its central relationship is rushed, and domestic violence is used as a driving plot force without sufficient nuance. Later stories achieve greater subtlety, as with an entry about a couple who embark on a hike in late retirement.

Throughout the book, the prose is clear, featuring pithy descriptions that ably establish the facts surrounding people's circumstances, as well as keen observations of common emotions like self-pity and regret. People express longing to transcend their pain in several stories, including in a quiet story about a man's difficult upbringing, memories of which are sparked by an impending house sale. Still, the range of possible outcomes in the book is narrow: more than one story ends in problem-solving via gunfire, stopping at a critical moment. Several feature women who imagine that marriage will resolve their loneliness. And many take on similar structures: a single person is introduced and then thrust into conflict. The result is a collection of eventful tales that are, at their core, composed most of fleeting impressions, and that become more predictable as the book progresses.

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KAREN RIGBY (June 21, 2023)

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