



Island (the one that wasn't supposed to be)

Gary Wilson

Biocentrism Media (Jul 8, 2013)

Softcover \$9.99 (178pp)

978-0-9784992-6-6

A search for existential meaning runs parallel with the story of a man's zestful life on the lam.

Gary Wilson's lively and pensive adventure novel, *Island (the one that wasn't supposed to be)*, follows a young fugitive as he evades the law while looking for opportunities to clear his name—all the while searching for ultimate meaning.

Wilson's hero—who shares his moniker and some of his backstory, despite the disclaimer on the copyright page stating that any resemblance to actual people or events is “entirely coincidental”—introduces himself to the reader in the midst of tense circumstances. Disguised to avoid discovery by bounty hunters and *Unsolved Mysteries* audiences, he watches his brother from afar in a foreign town, craving a way back into his old, comfortable existence, yet quietly savoring the zest of life on the lam.

Brief, conversational chapters are self-consciously demonstrative, reading as a grown-up, arrest-evading Holden Caulfield's might. “There is nothing like a nation-wide arrest warrant hanging over your head to ... teach you the existential responsibility of genuine discretion,” he says with good humor, amid self-deprecating and cheerful explorations of his flaws and strengths. The oft-acknowledged reader meets a man who claims to be honest because he is lazy, who names himself as a fading dilettante, and these flaws-cum-virtues feed into his domineering likability.

The narrator's circumstances, while clearly something he considers regrettable and unsolicited, also become an opportunity for some unanticipated reveling: falling for beautiful girls in places where love can never take root, and straining dollars and scraping together odd jobs just for food. Gary laments what cannot be, but it is implied that he does not entirely regret his rootlessness, particularly as the book ends by listing such “missed” opportunities with almost singsong delight.

Gary draws life from the various locales in which he finds himself, from Tijuana to La Paz to islands off the Vancouver coast, offering the outline of an entertaining and biting travelogue. Beautiful San Diego loses some of its allure because of its positively Canadian Republicanism; Tijuana is excused for the way tourists compromise all hope for authenticity.

Yet the book is brief, and its projects many. These engaging side trips are interrupted to provide opportunities for Wilson to existentially muse, and his awareness of his audience herein becomes something of a distraction. Cutesy diction is introduced here and there, as with “Hack in the Box and Burger Bing,”

Gary mulls over the failings of contemporary society, from Hollywood preoccupations with gratification, to the true meaning of bravery, to the way in which we formulate our personal tales. While these meditations provide some meaty thoughtfulness, they often simultaneously frustrate the pace: Will Gary approach his brother, or not? What of the suspicious figures who lurk in the background during scenes in Mexico and Southern California?

These unanswered, or slow to be answered, questions prove to be an impediment throughout, if largely because

Wilson's foreign vignettes are themselves such jocular reading. Nevertheless, there's enough fun and suspense here to ensure that Wilson will seduce his readership with some success.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (March 20, 2015)

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