

Norman Smith's Hobbies

Gareth Owen

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Norman Smith's Hobbies is a fun, absurdist trip down the rabbit hole of wall-breaking self-awareness.

In Gareth Owen's comedic novel *Norman Smith's Hobbies*, a British retiree pursues his fanciful interest in building a flight simulator to the detriment of those around him.

After Norman's first flying lesson, he falls in love with aviation. Unfortunately, due to a miscommunication in the cockpit, he's banned from all flight schools in the area. To solve this puzzling problem, Norman decides to build his own flight simulator.

Unconvinced by the protestations of his wife, Mrs. G, Norman decides to go to any lengths necessary to see his fantasy become reality, including having defunct Boeing aircraft delivered to his property and procuring parts from a less-than-reputable seller on the couple's vacation to India. From pilots to neighbors to former detectives, everyone who gets involved with Norman's schemes finds themselves questioning their sanity.

Most of the novel takes place in India and England, with acknowledged stereotyping of those cultures. England's famously dry humor is enhanced by British colloquialisms in both the story and the dialogue, while India's beautiful and ancient temples are contrasted with the modern-day problem of pollution that causes a haze in the cities. The flights between locations further show Norman's interest in aviation, with detailed descriptions of different kinds of airplanes and their mechanical parts.

Norman and Mrs. G have a relationship defined by banter and acceptance, and are many times shown to be at odds with each other, but are always willing to move past their disagreements. Their conversations are entertaining and relatable, building on their endearing knowledge of each other and mutual understandings of their quirks. Both Norman and Mrs. G adhere to gender roles in a deliberate way; as with the cultural attitudes of the novel, these habits are recognized, and discussion around them becomes part of the plot.

Norman and Mrs. G's world is populated by idiosyncratic people who add context and calamity to Norman's otherwise oblivious adventures. Godber, a retired detective, is convinced that Norman is a criminal; he is comedically described, and his obsession with Norman's bizarre behavior makes him a focused but incompetent adversary. Norman's neighbors plan to dash his backyard airplane plans while he is on vacation, displaying the insincerity of fair-weather friendships; their attempts to involve the planning council allow for lighthearted jabs at British politics.

These characters stop the story from time to time to complain about their representation, engaging in amusing arguments with the author. Their conversations pose questions about the nature of self, determinism, and reality, but aim for levity over philosophy. The major plot points are brought to a lighthearted conclusion, though many of the characters exit the story in abrupt ways, resulting in some chaos. Typographical errors and misspellings are present, especially towards the end.

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DELIA STANLEY (April 15, 2020)

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