

## South

### **Babak Lakghomi**

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A journalist heads to an offshore oil rig and stumbles onto a sinister story in Babak Lakghomi's political novel *South*.

After failing to publish an investigative piece on ornithologists, B writes a book about his missing father and the impact of his absence. Though many theories circulate—some planted by a hostile government, others held close by his mother—the fact remains that B's father disappeared when he was young. B is proud of his book; he accepts an offer for its publication along with a second assignment to look into a series of strikes on offshore oil rigs. He's to ask very few questions. Even so, the rig workers and administration ignore him, communications off the rig are difficult, and the air is heavy with more than the smell of salt.

B's mental and emotional states drive the novel. When he is awake, his thoughts cycle between his father, the goings-on of the rig, and his failing relationship with his wife. He becomes more anxious as his projects stagnate or morph to the point of becoming unrecognizable. The atmosphere of the book becomes tense and oppressive until the looming specter of a regime is made manifest.

A line in the book reads, "Every day [is] an echo of another." The concept of an echo, the reverberation of sound, is mirrored in the way the book draws parallels between B and his father. The limited or nonexistent communication, inability to perform duties, and focus on issues that dovetail with government interests are all present in B's life and the stories he shares about his father. Government interference in service of those interests solidifies the parallels and brings out the book's themes of authoritarian oversight and control.

Thrilling and disquieting, *South* is a disorienting, cerebral novel that meditates on state surveillance.

DONTANÁ MCPHERSON-JOSEPH (September / October 2023)

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