

## The Continental Divide

**Bob Johnson**

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The stories in Bob Johnson's collection *The Continental Divide* pulse with tension, their characters grounded in their convictions and using language ripe with country pulp.

Attentive to their characterizations and settings, these stories focus on the townsfolk of Mt. Moriah, Indiana. They have long-held family secrets, freak accidents, turkeys trespassing, and disagreements. In "The Devil's Age," a police officer investigates his own son and reckons with how his actions as a parent created someone capable of harming someone else; it's a complex narrative about how an officer of the law can end up being complicit in a community's dangers. And in the standout story "Bird Fever," problems arise between spouses when their baby is sickened by unknown means; the father is forced to confront his neighbor about the wildlife he feeds on his property. In contrast to other stories, the tension here comes not from mortal danger but from asking someone else to change their behavior.

At the heart of the collection is the exploration of people's relationships to one another through violence. The stories excel at delivering exacting, tense exchanges, though they sometimes falter when they deal with sexual violence. While sexual violence is not as central to the collection as a whole as the physical violence of guns and baseball bats is, when it does appear, it's a toss-up as to whether it serves a character's motivation or adds to the depravity at hand, exploding for the sake of shock value. "Her Precious Things" is a great example of the former; in it, a woman who cares for her ailing mother receives a notice from the county regarding their deteriorating cabin and reflects on her troubled past.

The taut short stories in *The Continental Divide* are set in the Midwest and are tinged with violence and crime.

NICHOLAS LEON (January / February 2025)

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