

The Great American Everything

Scott Gloden

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The stories of Scott Gloden's collection *The Great American Everything* explore family relationships and social problems.

Anxious parents drill their five-year-old daughter on how to handle emergencies with frightening results. A man's widowed, grieving brother-in-law adopts a baby under false pretenses. An unexpected pregnancy brings a variety of challenges for both the parents and their son. Dealing with the difficulties of modern life pushes each person to their emotional limits and does not always leave them in a better place. Often, their only rewards are a stronger sense of self as they move on to the next hurdle.

The stories highlight a variety of painful, complex problems—the pervasive fear of gun violence, a lack of accessible elder care, climate change, racial injustice, and sexual assault among them. But none of these issues exist in isolation. As the characters try to navigate each dilemma, they do so in concert with, or in opposition to, loved ones who have their own views about how they—and everyone else—should live. Solving problems creates new ones that are even tougher to address.

From the first story—"The Birds of Basra," about a young woman struggling with the ethics of charging vulnerable people for a necessary service—to the last—"Tennessee," in which a man tries to start a family as his mother slides deeper into a disturbing dementia—it is clear that life has no easy answers: there are only imperfect people making the best decisions they can in the moment. It is all too easy to relate to these characters as they are overwhelmed by forces bigger than themselves, but try to do what's right anyway.

The Great American Everything is a collection of quiet stories about how large-scale problems fit into the realm of each individual's existence.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May / June 2023)

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