

Value Village

Yann Zhao

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In the novel Value Village, an unsuccessful collector continues to pursue his passions despite multiple disappointments.

In Yann Zhao's novel *Value Village*, an unlucky jade collector dreams of a windfall find.

In the book's opening, ZhiJie—a dedicated bargain hunter who is perhaps blinded by his desires—learns that his wife JingYa's precious jade bracelet is a fake. It soon becomes clear that such disappointments are not an uncommon occurrence in the couple's lives. Because ZhiJie has limited knowledge of how to authenticate jade, he has made several expensive errors in his pursuit of the stone. Still, his main focus in life is acquiring a valuable piece of jade at a bargain price and realizing a profitable return on his multiple investments.

ZhiJie's worldview is rich, though the particulars of his life beyond his pursuit of jade are not addressed often enough. Instead, the plot focuses on ZhiJie's obsession with the stone to the exclusion of much else. Although other aspects of his life are mentioned in passing, including his central employment (which he uses as a means to fund his hobby), his pursuit of the precious stone subsumes these concerns. And although ZhiJie is married, his wife is also most often present in the book as the person he gives his treasures to; she is not fleshed out beyond this limited role.

Because little is known about its heroes beyond their connection to jade, the book's progression becomes superficial: it reports events as they occur, but without much emotional depth. As a result, this story of a person wholly in pursuit of wealth does little to distinguish itself beyond its particular context within ZhiJie's Chinese American culture. Indeed, its story meanders toward its abrupt conclusion, which includes a shocking and underexplained event that defies the audience's hopes for closure.

The prose reads as though it is a faltering English translation of a native Chinese speaker's tale; it includes phrases that seem to have been lost in translation, as with "her young carcass." There are moments where meaning is lost as a result—or in which awkward constructions arise, as with the stiff line "according to the mother." Vulgar expressions appear without need and without complementing the tale, too, as with an extended sidebar on "shitting" that does not serve the story well, beyond establishing the depths of poverty that ZhiJie has experienced.

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DEBBIE MCCARTHY (September 1, 2023)

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