

Will's Surreal Period

Robert Steven Goldstein

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Will's Surreal Period is a novel in which two brothers work to discover what might give them a true sense of purpose in their lives.

Divided family members learn to accept each other for who they are in Robert Steven Goldstein's novel *Will's Surreal Period*.

Will and Bert have learned to cope with Arthur, their tyrannical but wealthy father, in different ways: Will ran away to San Francisco to become a painter, while Bert hides his sexuality and tolerates his father's temper in hopes of inheriting his fortune. When Bert finally decides to come out, it leads to furor; Will finds himself in "possession" of Arthur. Both brothers adjust to this change in their circumstances, figuring out how to follow their passions to brighter, more stable futures.

Despite their differing circumstances and mutual lack of communication, Will and Bert have the same core problems: they are shy; they long to pursue artistic interests, but financial needs and unsupportive partners compel them to find reliable employment instead. Both enjoy the jobs they end up in, but the internal costs of their compromises remain. Will's story in this regard is heartbreaking: he starts out as a malleable plaything for those with stronger personalities in his life, only for a sudden artistic inspiration to bring new vigor to his career and his relationships. But when the source of this breakthrough threatens his future, he needs a new way to survive and thrive without the gifts he treasures most.

But people also have internalized prejudices to deal with, and Arthur's homophobia has consequences of particular weight: it fractures his relationship with his loyal son. Still, people's actions and reactions to these fraught circumstances are sometimes exaggerated. Some lose their tempers with ease—even without cause. These flare-ups highlight the extent of the family's dysfunction, but they also result in a somewhat surreal tone—one that extends to the book's sex scenes as well. At times, the cast's volatility is off-putting.

Further, the book's middle section is dominated by long conversations and scenes that feature the characters cooking and eating. While described in tempting terms, these meals lead to lulls. Conversations dominate the prose, whose timeline is sometimes muddled: two events that seem to occur in a simultaneous fashion are later revealed to have occurred months apart.

As the novel progresses, new relationships, and the terminations of old ones, prove difficult for people to adapt to, though these upheavals also often provide the sparks necessary for people to make overdue, crucial changes. Accepting such truths leads to delayed, gratifying growth: people learn to heal together, and some achieve equilibrium at last. If they work together, happiness comes to seem possible for this cast after all.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (May 10, 2022)

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