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Winter Amusements

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THE CONSEQUENCE OF SKATING

Steven Gillis

Black Lawrence Press
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Steven Gillis's *The Consequence of Skating* opens with a list of things the narrator, Mick Greene, knows: "The world is round, not flat, though at every turn there are crack sharp edges. I know Ethan Hawke but not Jeff Bridges, know history has its Hannibals, its Hank Aarons, Henry Millers, Hitlers and Horatio Algiers, and that human nature is constant, will keep producing each." It's an inventory of sorts, a fitting beginning to a novel that looks at exactly what it means to fall apart and put yourself back together, to consciously reassemble the detritus of a life nearly ruined by drugs, addiction, and perhaps most prominently, a simple lack of mindfulness.

The Consequence of Skating follows Mick, an actor fresh out of rehab following a drug-induced, onstage breakdown worthy of Lindsay Lohan or Charlie Sheen. Mick had made a name for himself as an actor, and had fallen into what he thought was a comfortable romance with Darcie, the kind of carelessly charismatic actor that "you couldn't stop watching, even when the focus on stage was somewhere else." Post-rehab, Mick is now doing public service, working as a night watchman/handyman at an amusement park, Birch Bow Adventure (or, "The Bow"), which is closed for the winter. He is troubled not so much by what he did or even the very public nature of his downfall, but by the issue of what he should do now. Mick's question isn't so much how to pick up the pieces, but which pieces to pick up, and what to do with them once they are in hand.

Gillis has created a moving, engaging, and entertaining meditation on how each life is a series of decisions.

The memory of his two loves—Darcie and the stage—haunt Mick as he makes his rounds along the bone-chilling winter skeleton of the Bow. Darcie has flitted on to a new boyfriend, and continues to advance her stage and film career. But possibly even more than Darcie, Mick is in love with theater. His lament isn't so much about the embarrassment of his last performance as it is about the squandering of future opportunities. Moreover, Gillis ably provides Mick a specific obsession: Harold Pinter's play *Moonlight* (1993). Directing his version is Mick's dream, and the thought that it may be ruined by his neglectful behavior, is the specter that hangs most doomfully over Mick's head. While he feeds fish in the aquarium or heats a Pop-Tart on the electric heater of his frigid hut, Mick thinks of many things, but mostly about *Moonlight*.

We watch Mick as he goes through his nightly ritual at the Bow, as he spends his days refinishing floors or painting or installing toilets for his real-estate broker brother. We watch him as he calls Darcie only to get her voicemail. As he leaves messages, feeds the cat they still mutually own, as he does the dishes and makes coffee and bemoans the broken heater in his truck. These moments are

small and detailed and probably the best compliment that can be given to Gillis is that, as we move through them with Mick, we really get a sense for what it might feel like to be an actor who is suddenly scriptless, an obsessed boyfriend who finds himself without a partner, a broken man forced to put his life back together. "Everything is recovery," Mick says. "Think. Act. Redo.... The cause and effect causes cause and effect, the link inexorable.... I take one step and then another, until I am across the floor and in my kitchen. In my kitchen, I turn on the machine for coffee. Once I have turned on the coffee, I go and rinse my cup."

And true to the novel's title, he skates. At the ice hockey rink of the Bow, Gillis supplies Mick a natural high by barrel jumping. When he is off work, he skates at a local lake, where he meets Cam, a twelve-year-old boy with a troubled home situation. Cam's mother is hospitalized with cancer. His brother is in the military, deployed to the Middle East. Mick takes the boy under his rickety wing. They skate. They eat hamburgers. Cam accompanies Mick on his nightly rounds at the Bow. Mick tries to get the kid to go to school on time, to do his homework, visit his mother in the hospital, to attend to the day-to-day duties that make up a life.

Eventually, Cam's mother comes home from the hospital, and his brother, now wounded and missing both legs, returns from the war. Mick starts seeing Sarah, a down-to-earth lounge singer who seems to represent all that Darcie does not. With this group, Mick begins to carve out a new domestic situation devoid of both the drama and the thrill of his relationship with Darcie, who could, he notes, "inject even the most mundane activities with jazz."

He's even hired to act in a clever bit of Internet video, which goes viral and starts Mick's career on an upswing. He trades his renewed fame for a chance to act in a promising movie with none other than Darcie, and also to finally stage his own version of *Moonlight*.

The question that looms over these proceedings, as it does over Gillis's novel itself, is whether Mick's past will encroach on the new life he has so mindfully created for himself.

Mick's progress is counterbalanced by his good friend, Ted, a computer scientist and political blogger who has built a program called G.O.D., or "Government Objectivity Design." With G.O.D., Ted hopes to "filter out subjective factors and resolve conflicts by making sure ill-advised histories do not repeat." In contrast to Mick, whose initial inventory of the things he knows reveals that his resources are both limited and scattered across the personal, romantic, political, and pop cultural landscape, G.O.D. knows everything—the entire history of man and war has been programmed into it's database. As Mick's new life tilts in one direction and then another, Ted heads

"Steven Gillis possesses that rarest of gifts, the voice that seems to flow effortlessly. This guy makes it look easy. Read the first three pages of *The Consequence of Skating*, and if you're not hooked, go see a doctor."
—Jonathan Evison, author of *All About Lulu* and *West of Here*

The CONSEQUENCE of SKATING
A novel by Steven Gillis
Author of *Temporary People*

to the Middle East to put G.O.D. to the test.

In the end, it is these conflicting approaches to understanding history that *The Consequence of Skating* examines. Is it all logic, one and zeros? If we do understand our history, are we then not doomed to repeat it? Or is there something more slippery at play, rendering us all spectators in our own lives, and as Mick describes himself: "hopeful but unsure what I'm about to see next, clueless and surprised how things appear sometimes out of nowhere, like sandstorms and hummingbirds, the fins of fish through the tide, and the riddle of dreams."

Steven Gillis has made no secret that he wrote *The Consequence of Skating* during a time of great personal turmoil. With this novel, he's created a moving, engaging, and (somehow) entertaining meditation on how each life is a series of decisions that are made one by one, step by step, conscious or not, and for better or worse.

Dave Housley's second collection of short fiction, *If I Knew the Way, I Would Take You Home*, is forthcoming from Dark Sky Books. His work has appeared in Columbia, Dark Sky, Hobart, Nerve, Quarterly West, and some other places. He's one of the editors of *Barrelhouse* magazine, and he keeps his online stuff at <http://www.davehousley.com>.