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Shotgun Lovesongs: A Novel by Nickolas Butler (review)

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Nickolas Butler, *Shotgun Lovesongs: A Novel*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014. 320 pp. \$25.99.

Nickolas Butler's *Shotgun Lovesongs* seems an unlikely novel to grab readers' ever-waning attention spans. Utterly lacking in the clever, irony-laden winks and nudges that permeate far too many works of contemporary literature, the novel is instead steeped in a rare and warm bath of sincerity. Moreover, unlike the glut of zombie-strewn dystopias of so many bestsellers, the setting of Butler's debut is Little Wing, Wisconsin, an American everytown, special only in its specialness to its longtime residents. On top of all this is the fact that when confronted with the question of what the plot of the book actually is, one might be stumped for an answer; not all that much happens in *Shotgun Lovesongs*. But Butler has managed to turn all of this into literary virtue, for at the end of the final page, one is hard pressed to say that this is anything but an impressive and engaging debut.

The residents of Little Wing, or at least the ones we readers become familiar with, are utterly likeable. We root for them. The book offers alternating points of view, so even when these characters fail themselves and one another, it is not long before their regret is given voice and, thus, their nature redeemed. Henry, the reliable dairy farmer, opens the book and serves as the narrative's backbone. Beth, Henry's bright wife and the lone female member of the gang, is humble despite the effect her beauty and charm have on the men around her. Ronny is a former rodeo rider who suffered a fall—not from a bull, but rather from his own drunken feet—and sustained a head injury that left him slightly slow on the uptake. And there is Kip, the successful capitalist who shed the small town as soon as he could, only to return, his view of the world hard and out of step with the easygoing world of his youth.

If there is a central character in the book, though, it is Lee, a musician who broke big with a low-fi folk rock album (titled *Shotgun Lovesongs*) recorded in a converted chicken coop in the northwoods. Lee is clearly and unapologetically based on real life indie rock darling Justin Vernon, who attended the same Eau Claire high school as Butler and who records under the name Bon Iver. Bon Iver's 2007 debut album, *For Emma, Forever Ago*, was, the story goes, produced in a cabin over the course of one solitudinous Wisconsin winter (the name Bon Iver being an intentional misspelling of *bon hiver*, the French for "good winter"). In the book, Lee's fame has catapulted him into the world of tabloids and the Hollywood/New York

corridor. And yet, for all the riches and glamour, Lee is consistently drawn back to Little Wing and his cadre of friends.

Again and again the book proves itself to be interested in how these characters deal with the situations they find themselves in far more than the situations themselves as plot points. Through the use of an alternating retrospective point of view narrative structure, the book undercuts traditional notions of “tension.” Even when characters find themselves in mortal danger, we know that they will emerge with their lives. After all, they are telling their own sides of the story from some point in the future. This setup effectively forces the author to reassess what is important, and the reader benefits from this reconfiguration of values. Rather than concerning ourselves with the relatively simple binary of life and death, we instead are witness to the far more complex questions of how we humans manage to navigate the worlds of love and fellowship each and every day. Whether or not they will continue to walk and breathe upon the earth is of secondary concern to the more important question: How will these people escape with their relationships intact? And we care about the answer because within the world of the novel a life without these magma-deep friendships is not a life worth living.

But perhaps more than any one character, and one relationship, the book seems to be focused on Little Wing, the tiny Wisconsin town where nearly all of the narrative’s events take place. Wisconsin has been good to debut novelists over the past few years, lending itself to such breakout tomes as David Wroblewski’s *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle* and Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding*. But more than either of these, *Shotgun Lovesongs* seems to be, well, a bit of a love song to the rolling midwestern landscape, to the stalwart midwestern character. Butler’s prose comes most alive when he focuses his eye and ear on the region itself, and he most often gives these moments to Lee, the musician, as in this passage where he looks back on returning from a stint on the east coast:

So I drove through southern Wisconsin, past Madison, past the Dells, and farther north, the aspen trees so yellow that when a shaft of sunlight hit them it actually looked like a sound, like a high-pitched musical note so pure it was hard to keep my eyes open—the sound of some divine sword spitting the air. And the maples, their reds as bold as the hearts we crayoned the hell out of to give to our mothers.

It is a land where “life unfurls with the seasons” and “time unspools itself slowly, moments divvied out like some truly decadent dessert.” But-

ler could easily be accused of romanticizing his beloved dairyland, and in turn, the larger idea of small town America. But he seems ready to counter any objections by doubling down, as he seems to here, again in the voice of Lee:

America, I think, is about poor people playing music and poor people sharing food and poor people dancing, even when everything else in their lives is so desperate, and so dismal that it doesn't seem that there should be any room for any music, any extra food, or any extra energy for dancing. And people say that I'm wrong, that we're a puritanical people, an evangelical people, a selfish people, but I don't believe that. I don't want to believe that.

Shotgun Lovesongs is a welcome respite from the parade of cynicism that makes up far too much of our American media. Even in the world of literary fiction, we too often detect a sort of glee emanating from the author behind the pages, as she or he luxuriates in the misfortunes of the characters. If there is a major fault in Butler's novel, it is the opposite. Perhaps he cares for these characters a bit too much, and this affection may disarm him and effectively prohibit him from exploring the depths of their natures. But one suspects that Butler might argue that, counter to accepted wisdom, one's nature may not be brought into clearest relief when suffering great distress; rather, it could be we find out who we really are on some day like any other day, having a beer with old friends.

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Edward Janus, *Creating Dairyland: How Caring for Cows Saved Our Soil, Created Our Landscape, Brought Prosperity to Our State, and Still Shapes Our Way of Life in Wisconsin*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011. 232 pp. \$26.95, paper.

This extraordinarily readable book examines a quintessential midwestern cultural marker—the Wisconsin dairy industry—and argues that “dairy cows . . . created the Wisconsin that we know and love today” and instilled in local residents a “faith that care of the cow and the soil would bring them prosperity, even happiness” (xiii). In particular, the author notes his awe at the intellectual and scientific manner with which many farmers con-