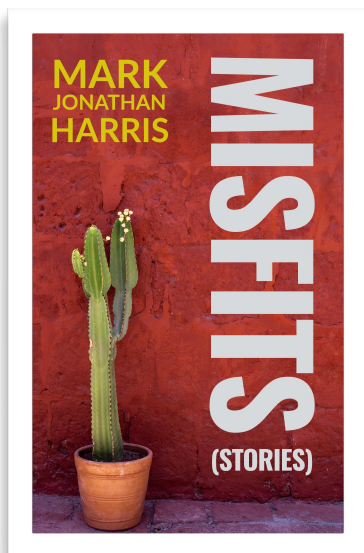




INDEPENDENT BOOK REVIEW

A CELEBRATION OF SMALL PRESS AND SELF-PUBLISHED BOOKS



Misfits

By Mark Jonathan Harris

Genre: Literary Fiction / Short Story Collection

Reviewed by Samantha Hui

A balm for the feelings of loneliness and self-alienation that many of us experience in the modern age

“I often feel that mystery, forces in the universe we can’t explain. You can call it God if you want, or luck, or fate... inadequate words really for something we don’t understand. It’s why I keep reading books like this. And delivering babies. Every birth reminds me of the uncertainty we all live with, for which there are no guarantees, no easy answers.”

What is preventing you from being the person you always imagined yourself to be? A lack of money? Your partner’s unrealistic expectations? Bad luck? *Misfits* is a collection of short stories that delves into the human experience and explores how the things we’re sorry for are often the things that are holding us back. The stakes are high: the book contains a monkey, gangbangers, and a stolen cactus plant. But the heart of the stories is about who we are in the face of another and whether or not we truly want to be that person.

“What we choose to recall or forget or invent about the past always reflects our present needs.”

Conversational in nature, Mark J. Harris’s *Misfits* is more character driven than it is plot driven. The book contains twelve stories, each unrelated to the other, but they all share the same theme of self-doubt. In “A Drink with Oppie,” a character has a chance encounter J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who develops the atomic bomb. But the ultimate question the character asks of Oppenheimer isn’t about the morality of creating a weapon of mass destruction, but rather about his regrets surrounding his relationship with Jean Tatlock.

In “Mute,” a father is at his wits’ end trying to help with his son’s autism, leading him to purchase a pet monkey to pull his son out of his shell. Though the story could easily become derailed with the introduction of a monkey, the story is tender and introspective as the father reckons with the root of his fears. The titular story “Misfits” is about a tete-a-tete between a high school aged, radical climate change activist and a dissatisfied tax accountant.

“I wanted to be desired again, not judged, swept away rather than measured.”

Throughout the book, there is a feeling of restlessness that emanates from each character. Married men sleep with much younger, unmarried women; they’re unable to curb their urge to cheat but still even more incapable of leaving their wives. Young women suffer the traumas from their fathers and their partners, wanting for connection but seeking it from the wrong people. The restlessness of the book plays out almost similar to the restless chatter we hear in our own heads when there are feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, or feeling as if we ourselves are a misfit. Through our encounters with others, they show us our limitations, but they are not the ones that make us feel abnormal. In seeing our limitations, we push onto ourselves to the feeling of unfulfillment.

“Does admitting you’re sorry always have to cost more than you can afford?”

A major theme that comes up throughout the book is the cost of a life fulfilled. Whether it be through financial means or something intangible, there is always a cost for the lives that we want to live. When we wrong a loved one, there is a cost we must pay to repair the relationship. Or a cost to pay to hide the wrong we committed. Or we need to pay up to appear to others the way we want to appear. But the idea of there always being a cost suggests that our engagement with others is often if not always a transaction. *Misfits* shows the fatigue that befalls us when we try to live a transactional life.

“The world is broken and the Jewish people have a responsibility to repair it. Jews must work not only to fix the damage they see, but to build a more just world. If you see what’s wrong and ugly in the world, and do nothing to fix it, then it’s you yourself who needs repair.”

I enjoyed this book a lot. It is raw, honest, and insightful. It is emotional and honest without being saccharine. In many ways, it had me re-evaluating my own personal values juxtaposed with how I present myself. I found a lot of characters in the book to be morally gray, but the book takes a contemplative and tender approach to describing them. *Misfits* is a reminder that we are not the only ones who feel out of place.