

Goodnight and Better Tomorrow

Goodnight, Texas: A Novel by William J. Cobb. (Denver: Unbridled Books, 2006. 304 pp. \$24.95 cloth)

William J. Cobb's *Goodnight, Texas*, is a sinking ship of a town, and the novel of the same name depicts the lives of those aboard. The effects of global warming and threatening meteorological conditions seem to explain the lack of fish in Red Moon Bay, which in turn causes financial ruin for Goodnight. But as the characters tragically accept their plight, opportunity presents itself when a giant zebrafish washes ashore, presaging a massive hurricane seething in the Gulf. This backdrop allows Cobb to create a series of quirky, often very funny, and culturally diverse characters. And since they are imbedded in this unstable milieu, interaction is forced, and potentially unhealthy relationships unfold.

In one strand of the plot, Cobb presents the shifting relationships of Gabriel Perez, the Hispanic and stereotypical bad-boy; Una Vu, a beautiful Hispanic-Asian dreamer; Falk Powell, the unassuming, intelligent white kid; and his cousin Leesha, the even younger, though somehow more corrupted, white kid. Falk, Leesha's cousin, and Una, Gabriel's girlfriend, work at the Black Tooth Café, owned by an eccentric and prophetic Russian, Gusef Smurov. Recently laid off, Gabriel unbelievably acquires a job as a driver's education instructor/bus driver. Una leaves Gabriel because of his quick and very petty temper. Thus liberated, Una is able to consider and accept Falk's innocent, yet brave, flattery, and a cautious emotional chemistry develops. Gabriel discerns Falk's interest in Una and, true to his pettiness, vaguely plans his revenge on Falk. Unfortunately, Cobb does not resolve the question of whether Una and Falk will develop their relationship.

In another strand of the plot, Cobb reveals two remarkable events and their impact on these characters. The first is the arrival of the giant zebrafish. The exotic fish allows Gusef and Falk an opportunity to capitalize on its arrival. Gusef tells Falk, his employee, to photograph and retrieve the fish for mounting. As Falk's photos are bought and published in a newspaper, and as Gusef's mounted zebrafish draws attention and therefore tourist business, the arrival of the zebrafish profits both characters and indicates their business acumen. But the zebrafish's arrival also indicates the second remarkable event—hurricane Tanya's arrival.

One of the interesting topics of the novel is its relation to Hurricane Katrina. Like New Orleans residents' reluctance to vacate despite the massive, swiftly-approaching Hurricane Katrina, only the tourists seem to leave Good-

night. Una's mother refuses to leave for fear of looters. True to the rebellious spirit manifest in the opening lines which describe the people of Goodnight in their hopeless situation—"They went broke slowly, slowly enough to see it happen to each other and to enjoy it, to enjoy the notice and watching of it"—they seem to welcome the storm. Gusef has a party on his boat to welcome the destruction. To show further that he has nothing to lose, Gabriel also welcomes the storm. When asked about whether he is scared, he replies: "Truth is, I'm not scared at all.... About time something happened to this town. Wind like terror. Lightning. Thunder. All the fucking tourists running like scared rabbits." The suggestion is that with nothing to lose, there is little reason to endure the trials of fleeing.

Paradoxically, Tanya's destruction binds rather than separates the characters. The budding romance between

Una and Falk finally flowers during the tag-end of the storm. The Sea Horse Motel's destruction allows a despondent woman, whose husband had been physically and verbally abusive, to move in with Gusef, who gives her a job. Tanya's devastation also makes Goodnight famous and therefore Goodnight by the Sea becomes a tourist attraction. The news depicts Goodnight as "The Forgotten America," which is precisely what the novel seems to say about the region it depicts. Tourists come not to vacation but to "tour the 'war zone'." Furthermore, in the ensuing months, the fish return to Red Moon Bay, thus restoring financial security. But the reader knows better than to celebrate these prosperities with the characters; we now know that this

is merely indicative of the region's volatile conditions.

Overall, the story is important because—as it might as well be a piece of local color writing—it sheds light on a forsaken region and its forlorn inhabitants, and it is entertaining because those inhabitants form an eclectic cast thrown together in an interesting situation. But the plot is difficult to follow, and the lack of quotation marks does nothing for the novel but add confusion. (For the most part, Cobb does do a good job of separating the narrator from the characters.) The figurative language is at times overbearing in frequency and form and becomes a seemingly endless string of "Texan" platitudes. However, despite their banality, these platitudes are sometimes useful for the novel's realism. Though I enjoyed reading *Goodnight, Texas*, I did not take much from it, and I have no urge to reread it to gain more insight.

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