

Godforsaken Idaho Shawn Vestal

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Naturally, it was surprising to wake up the way we did, with the clocks and calendars wrong, and the direction of the sunsets and sunrises switched, but soon enough the unthinkable became routine, as ...

Summer Stories: The Lost Year – ‘Home Safe’ by Shawn Vestal

Shawn Vestal sets the stories in his focused yet far-reaching debut collection among regular Mormon folks who live in Idaho, touching on their lives in the past, the present and even the afterworld.

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From the winner of 2014’s PEN Robert W. Bingham Prize, an unforgettable debut novel about Loretta, a teenager married off as a “sister wife,” who makes a break for freedom At the heart of this exciting debut novel, set in Arizona and Idaho in the mid-1970s, is fifteen-year-old Loretta, who slips out of her bedroom every evening to meet her so-called gentile boyfriend. Her strict Mormon parents catch her returning one night, and promptly marry her off to Dean Harder, a devout yet materialistic fundamentalist who already has a wife and a brood of kids. The Harders relocate to his native Idaho, where Dean’s teenage nephew Jason falls hard for Loretta. A Zeppelin and Tolkien fan, Jason worships Evel Knievel and longs to leave his close-minded community. He and Loretta make a break for it. They drive all night, stay in hotels, and relish their dizzying burst of teenage freedom as they seek to recover Dean’s cache of “Mormon gold.” But someone Loretta left behind is on their trail... A riveting story of desire and escape, Daredevils boasts memorable set pieces and a rich cast of secondary characters. There’s Dean’s other wife, Ruth, who as a child in the 1950s was separated from her parents during the notorious Short Creek raid, when federal agents descended on a Mormon fundamentalist community. There’s Jason’s best friend, Boyd, part Native American and caught up in the activist spirit of the time, who comes along for the ride, with disastrous results. And Vestal’s ultimate creation is a superbly sleazy chatterbox—a man who might or might not be Evel Knievel himself—who works his charms on Loretta at a casino in Elko, Nevada. A lifelong journalist whose Spokesman column is a fixture in Spokane, WA, Shawn has honed his fiction over many years, publishing in journals like McSweeney’s and Tin House. His stunning first collection, Godforsaken Idaho, burrowed into history as it engaged with masculinity and crime, faith and apostasy, and the West that he knows so well. Daredevils shows what he can do on a broader canvas—a fascinating, wide-angle portrait of a time and place that’s both a classic coming of age tale and a plunge into the myths of America, sacred and profane.

Winner of the 2014 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Fiction Shortlisted for the William Saroyan International Prize for Writing Named "Outstanding 2013 Collection" by The Story Prize Pushcart Prize Winner In this stunning debut, Shawn Vestal transports us to the afterlife, the rugged Northwest, and the early days of Mormonism. From "The First Several Hundred Years Following My Death," an absurd, profound vision of a hellish heaven, to "Winter Elders," in which missionaries calmly and relentlessly pursue a man who has left the fold, these nine stories illuminate the articles of faith that make us human. The concluding triptych tackles the legends and legacy of Mormonism head-on, culminating in "Diviner," a seriocomic portrait of the young Joseph Smith, back when he was not yet the founder of a religion but a man hired to find buried treasure. Godforsaken Idaho is an indelible collection by the writer you need to explore next.

A high speed and darkly comic road trip through a near future America with a big hearted mercenary, from beloved and acclaimed novelist Dan Chaon. Sleepwalk’s hero, Will Bear, is a man with so many aliases that he simply thinks of himself as the Barely Blur. At fifty years old, he’s been living off the grid for over half his life. He’s never had a real job, never paid taxes, never been in a committed relationship. A good-natured henchman with a complicated and lonely past and a passion for LSD microdosing, he spends his time hopscothching across state lines in his beloved camper van, running sometimes shady often dangerous errands for a powerful and ruthless operation he’s never troubled himself to learn too much about. He has lots of connections, but no true ties. His longest relationships are with an old rescue dog that has post-traumatic stress and a childhood friend as deeply entrenched in the underworld as he is, who, lately, he’s less and less sure he can trust. Out of the blue, one of Will’s many burner phones heralds a call from a twenty-year-old woman claiming to be his biological daughter. She says she’s the product of one of his long-ago sperm donations; he’s half certain she’s Al. She needs his help. She’s entrenched in a widespread and nefarious plot involving Will’s employers, and for Will to continue to have any contact with her increasingly fuzzes the line between the people he is working for and the people he’s running from. With his signature blend of haunting emotional realism and fast-paced intrigue, Dan Chaon populates his fractured America with characters who ring all too true. Gazing both back to the past and forward to an inevitable-enough-seeming future, Sleepwalk examines where we’ve been and where we’re going and the connections that bind us, no matter how far we travel to dodge them or how cleverly we hide.

In I’m Fine, But You Appear to Be Sinking the strange and the mundane collide. These are stories of strange experiences set in familiar places, and of familiar experiences set in strange places. Many of the pieces in I’m Fine take place close to home, in suburban neighborhoods, or rural communities. The settings are conventional, yet something unexpected, or even magical, is occurring. In one piece, a couple speculates about random objects that appear without reason in their backyard. In another, neighbors try to figure out if a local meth dealer is keeping a live tiger captive on his property. In other pieces, it’s the setting that’s fantastical, but the characters’ reactions that remain ordinary, like in the titular story where a journalist lost at sea and hunted by a mythical ocean creature admits to struggling with loneliness and isolation in much the same way he does even when he’s safe at home. Although they are not directly linked by any specific character, the pieces in this collection are bound through reoccurring imagery and a shared theme of protagonists in emotional peril. There are unexpected appearances and disappearances, movement of inanimate objects, the search for something lost, the finding of something unusual. There are prophesies, dreams, unidentifiable creatures, and environmental catastrophes on a scale both large and small. There are action figures and octopuses, sullen teenagers and missing cats. At their core, these stories are imbued with mystery, oddity, humor, and empathy. They each stand on their own, but mean considerably more when read together.

It’s 1974. Fifteen-year-old Loretta slips out of her bedroom to meet her "Gentile" boyfriend. This time, her strict Mormon parents catch her returning and soon she's married off to Dean Harder, a fundamentalist who already has a wife and a brood of kids, some not much younger than Loretta herself. Trapped in her role as a "sister wife," Loretta dreams of another, better future, of a world glimpsed in magazines and advertisements. Her chance comes when she meets Jason, Dean’s teenage nephew, who worships Evel Knievel and longs to leave his small Idaho town - and the Mormon faith - behind. Shawn Vestal' exhilarating debut novel delivers a dizzying jolt of teenage freedom as they drive into the American night, seeking to recover Dean's cache of "Mormon gold." But someone Loretta left behind is on their trail...Both a riveting road novel and an unforgettable coming-of-age story, punctuated by the disembodied voice of Evel Knievel, Daredevils plunges full speed into the myths of the America West, sacred and profane. --

Inspired by Jon Krakauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven and Jess Walter’s Every Knee Shall Bow, WHEN THE MOON TURNS TO BLOOD explores modern-day survivalism and end-times extremism through the story of Lori Vallow and her husband, grave digger turned doomsday novelist, Chad Daybell. When police in Rexburg, Idaho perform a wellness check on seven J.J. Vallow and his sister, sixteen-year-old Tylee Ryan, both children are nowhere to be found. Their mother, Lori, gives a phony explanation, and when officers return the following day with a search warrant, she, too, is gone. As the police begin to close in, Vallow and Daybell’s larger web begins to unravel. Vallow’s case is sinuously complex, and the accused Black Widow turns out to have had bodies piling up around her. WHEN THE MOON TURNS TO BLOOD tells a fascinating story of murder, paranoia, and disinformation, and explores the such increasingly relevant question: “What happens when believing the world is ending goes too far?”

The Cassandra follows a woman who goes to work in a top secret research facility during WWII, only to be tormented by visions of what the mission will mean for humankind. Mildred Groves is an unusual young woman. Gifted and cursed with the ability to see the future, Mildred runs away from home to take a secretary position at the Hanford Research Center in the early 1940s. Hanford, a massive construction camp on the banks of the Columbia River in remote South Central Washington, exists to test and manufacture a mysterious product that will aid the war effort. Only the top generals and scientists know that this product is processed plutonium, for use in the first atomic bombs. Mildred is delighted, at first, to be part of something larger than herself after a lifetime spent as an outsider. But her new life takes a dark turn when she starts to have prophetic dreams about what will become of humankind if the project is successful. As the men she works for come closer to achieving their goals, her visions intensify to a nightmarish pitch, and she eventually risks everything to question those in power, putting her own physical and mental health in jeopardy. Inspired by the classic Greek myth, this 20th century reimagining of Cassandra's story is based on a real WWII compound that the author researched meticulously. A timely novel about patriarchy and militancy, The Cassandra uses both legend and history to look deep into man’s capacity for destruction, and the resolve and compassion it takes to challenge the powerful.

A sleek, fast-paced story of high school boys in Tacoma, their anointed leader and the decision to find a way out. The new novel from Eric Barnes, author of IndieNext selection SHIMMER.

From Sister Wives and Big Love to The Book of Mormon on Broadway, Mormons and Mormonism are pervasive throughout American popular media. In Latter-day Screens, Brenda R. Weber argues that mediated Mormonism contests and reconfigures collective notions of gender, sexuality, race, spirituality, capitalism, justice, and individualism. Focusing on Mormonism as both a meme and an analytic, Weber analyzes a wide range of contemporary media produced by those within and those outside of the mainstream and fundamentalist Mormon churches, from reality television to feature films, from blogs to YouTube videos, and from novels to memoirs by people who struggle to find agency and personhood in the shadow of the church’s teachings. The broad archive of mediated Mormonism contains socially conservative values, often expressed through neoliberal strategies tied to egalitarianism, meritocracy, and self-actualization, but it also offers a passionate voice of contrast on behalf of plurality and inclusion. In this, mediated Mormonism and the conversations on social justice that it fosters create the pathway toward an inclusive, feminist-friendly, and queer-positive future for a broader culture that uses Mormonism as a gauge to calibrate its own values.

Mr. Lipton’s book is the first complete and unbiased survey of the beat generation and its role in our society. Here are the intimate facts about these people and their attitudes toward sex, dope, jazz, art, religion, parents, landlords, employers, politicians, draft boards, the law and, most important, toward the "square". The author presents a picture of their way of life, their individual backgrounds, the language they have appropriated, in terms made clear for the first time to those of us who have been confused and puzzled about them. He also provides a balanced discussion of their literature, art and music, of what they produce and fail to produce in the arts they practice.—Print Ed.

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