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## Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives (Book Review)

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## ***Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*, by Brad Watson**

Book Review by Carole Burkett

Brad Watson's third book of fiction, *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*, is a pleasant, slow evisceration. There are few of the roughest human experiences possible that Watson does not cover, from the aftermath of romantic relationships in "Visitation," to unwanted pregnancy in "Water Dog God," and the death of a sibling in "Alamo Plaza." Yet Watson's talent for capturing character makes each story necessary, and each heartbreak a trainwreck the reader cannot disregard.

The novella "Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives" is the collection's gem. The grotesque strangeness that overwhelms plot in "Ordinary Monsters" is smoothly integrated here with Watson's arid southern style. The young narrator is practical and honest throughout his life's story, spurred by an unplanned pregnancy and the wedding that results. The unshakable consistency of the tone carries the reader through many alternative lives that the narrator and his young bride could have lived, evaluating surreal possibilities as if a lion is no stranger in a Southern suburb than the story's sweltering attic apartment or VW van. Resolution comes through the experiences of the narrator, who finds equilibrium and humanity in the process of deciding who around him is human and who is alien. In this uncertainty, Watson's microscopic level of character detail proves useful; the reader can understand the truth of the situation along with the narrator.

Watson illuminates the lives of children well, whether he is invading their headspace or observing them from the character of an alienated father, he captures their variation and essence. In "Alamo Plaza," Watson transitions smoothly from the narrator's adult reflections to his childhood memories of his brother, capturing his death through description of a tropical storm's aftermath: "some incredible violence had occurred, and yet almost everything remained intact."

Despite Watson's skill portraying men and children, his female characters seem limited to tragedy. In both "Fallen Nellie" and "The Misses Moses," plots follow the characters' descent into loneliness and failure without the redemption offered to Watson's men in "Visitation" and "Are You Mr. Lonelee?" Yet in all of these, his description of physical sensation absorbs the reader into the mind of the narrator. The swift pace of the collection may make this sensory acuity exhausting, however; he does not give the reader more than half a breath before the next heartache.

Though Watson's collection dwells on melancholy, it succeeds in transferring a fresh perspective on the muddiness of everyday life, carefully communicating what one of Watson's characters calls "the inexplicable everyday, the oddness of being, the senseless belonging to this and not that."

Watson is a professor of English at the University of Wyoming. His first collection of fiction *Last Days of the Dog-Men* won several awards for first fiction, and *Aliens* won the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Fiction.