

Weedeater: An Illustrated Novel

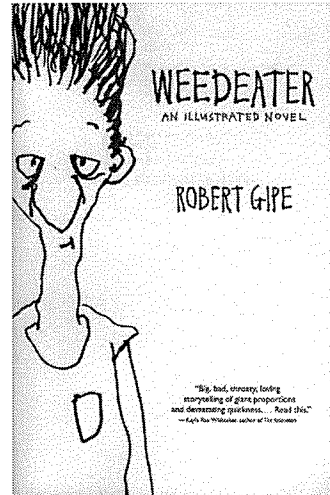
By Robert Gipe (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018) \$27.95, hardcover. ISBN 9780821423097, 250 pp.

If a novel were a family reunion, this one is not the kind where you all get matching tee-shirts and go on a cruise, or rent out a pavilion somewhere and meet up on the date set since last year and everyone knows whether to bring a covered dish or sweet tea or a pound cake. This one is KFC in the park, and you swing by if you can make it. It starts with tea and ends with a case of Budweiser, and there's a good chance some fools end up swimming in the quarry. At this kind, the talk turns to long-dead dogs and old pranks and how much it used to snow. Even if you don't see this part of the family very much, you know at least one place you belong. And if you're lucky, this kind of reunion is also funny as hell. Robert Gipe's *Weedeater* (2018) is this kind of family reunion. My favorite kind.

Weedeater picks up six years after Gipe's first novel, *Trampoline* (Ohio Univ. Press, 2015) introduced the Jewell family in Canard County, Kentucky (see *AppalJ* review, v. 43.1-2, pp. 86-90). In *Trampoline*, Dawn Jewell was helping her Mamaw fight environmental destruction in her mountains, while listening to a radio station out of Bristol, and trying to figure out how to survive in a family that seemed to be falling apart. In *Trampoline*, Dawn falls into some sort of love, and trips into adulthood with readers cheering her on. In *Weedeater*, Dawn's been married to Willett long enough to be tired of him, so she and their daughter, Nicolette, are back in Canard County for a visit.

Gene, the weedeater of the novel, is like the guy at the reunion who wanders over for some fried chicken and stays for a beer until everybody figures he's related somehow. Gene happens upon Dawn, her Aunt June—he finds her so achingly perfect he just calls her That Woman: “I got to where I couldn't bear to say her name” (2)—and much of the Canard County crew that we got to know in *Trampoline*. We get to see how they've grown, meet the new generation, hear who's died, who's in jail, and who ought to be. Gene carries us along to this family reunion, reminding anyone paying attention that there's more than one way to look at a Kentucky that's shaped by meth abuse, poverty, and lawlessness. As Gene says, “It was peaceful in That Woman's yellow bug light, felt like there was room enough for all of us” (86). The way he sees it is tender, forgiving, and hopeful.

In Gipe's books, no one gets to be the hero. He's too good for that and pays too much attention to the way life actually goes to give us a hero. Dawn Jewell is surely central to both novels, and she is a character both familiar and unknowable. She earns the affection of readers, not in spite of her flaws and vulnerability but because of them. In *Trampoline*, she was a 17-year-old figuring out how to live in the world. By *Weedeater*, she's done enough living to know that Canard County isn't the only messed up place in the world,



and she's lived away from home long enough to start to realize what home means.

Weedeater is narrated alternately by Dawn, Gene, and June (with a teaser chapter from Nicolette at the end of the book). The sections, labeled by point of view, hand off the story, sometimes overlapping mid-sentence. The effect is an immediate shift in perspective that decenters any one perspective and creates a communal tale. What Dawn is saying sounds different when June tells how she heard it. A reader's point of view, aligned in *Trampoline* with Dawn, broadens through the view of the title character, Weedeater. Gene's outsider status lets us see this family from a perspective that is at once too close, but always just outside—the backseat of the car or through the open door from the porch. The Jewell family is positioned as both subject and object as these generous narrators talk us through one month that starts with a meth-related car crash and ends with a community art project.

The power of *Weedeater* isn't in its plot twists, or even in the characters that Gipe has dreamt up or remembered. The power is in the way that the writer turns a phrase and we feel like we've heard that before, or wish we had: "I felt dry as a bird skeleton I found in Mamaw's attic one time" (142); "Her face looked like instant potatoes been in the fridge a week" (173). There's power in the way that the book sees itself as a story being told, acknowledging its audience and the parts that get strange. Directly addressing the reader, Dawn says, "You don't know, do you? You don't know what it's like to never want anything cause you don't have a way to keep it safe. Every single thing in my life got broke. Or stole. Or lost. Every chair in pieces. Every rug pissed on. Every glass and plate and toy and pretty little thing on every shelf shattered" (44). It's in the way that death gets told, with all of the disorientation and gut punches, but none of the sentimentality: "When somebody dies," Dawn says, "90 percent of what happens next is fake" (129). The power of *Weedeater* is in Robert Gipe's ability to listen, collect, and create small moments and phrases and scenes. It feels like you've been scooped up and plopped down in the middle of a world that has all the constraints and all of the structures that hold up any other world that exists anywhere. Duty and habit and comfort drive this book as much as desire and rebellion. It's the story of a place and a family in a moment in time. The effect, for a lot of us, is that it feels like a sort of homecoming. It feels like a reunion. Whether we've got an Aunt June or an Uncle Hubert, we all probably went to school with a Belinda Coates and like to fancy ourselves a little bit like Dawn Jewell. And if not, that's okay. You'll still get to know some people that don't fit the mold (because there is no mold) and who are both specific and universal in the ways that they grieve, navigate family, stake out independence, and wonder what comes next.

Robert Gipe might have set up shop in Seattle or Des Moines and told stories this good. He might be writing about someone in Tampa or Bismarck, and I'd still want to read it. But he isn't. He is telling a complicated, beautiful, heartbreaking, and hilarious story about Canard County, Kentucky, and Upper

East Tennessee. Gipe doesn't lean on caricature, and he doesn't feel obligated to avoid harsh truths about poverty and its effects. What's most remarkable is the way that this book resists the sort of transformation that we want. Near the end of the book, Dawn says, "So I waited and waited some more, thinking love would wash over me, or my hate would turn solid, or there would be a direction lit up, obvious for me to go, and I would become either a superhero or a villain. I breathed, and I held my breath, but you know what happened? Nothing. I wasn't one bit different" (220). That is a harder and a more true story to tell. Gipe manages to craft characters who look around and see drug addiction and extractive industries and dysfunction—and who are funny and fierce and reflective. What makes *Weedeater* and the entire Canard County series so important is also what makes it so pleasurable. Gipe writes of a place and a time and a people, and he writes it well. When telling a story that too often gets cast with an agenda, he tells it with dexterous skill that makes us forget we're reading a book sometimes and feel like we might just dive into that quarry after all.

Meredith McCarroll

Meredith McCarroll is the director of writing and rhetoric at Bowdoin College. She was born and raised in western North Carolina and earned her Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee.