

## Lamda Book Report

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### GRISLY HUMOR

Reviewed by David Blaustein

Father's Day

By Philip Galanes

Alfred A. Knopf

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HB, \$22.95, 216 pp.

I won't be giving away any of the plot of *Father's Day*, Philip Galanes' first novel, by clueing you in to the narrator's father's suicide, which takes place a few months prior to the book's opening. From the very first sentence, dad's death in the backyard is the central, staggering, irreducible fact that narrator Matthew Vaber—New York fine art photographer gallery manager and unreconstituted sex addict—must come to grips with. Or, alternately, a fact he must try to escape as much as he can, in the manner of addicts everywhere—all while knowing that there is no escape.

Titling a novel about the heartbreak associated with a father's suicide, *Father's Day* in other hands might have been merely a wistful gesture. In Galanes' world, the title becomes more than an example of the attitude that author Galanes really gets off on—an attitude that giddily goes from tongue-in-cheek to sardonic, hysterical overkill. Galanes' first-person narrative is a series of comic vignettes that cut back and forth between Matthew's bereavement; his stultifying phone sex addiction; his habitually disastrous real-time meetings; his father-figure therapist with whom he can barely keep an appointment; his embattled, grief-denying mother; and not least the memories which are constantly intruding on his present-day experiences in the way of the most self-absorbed. Galanes is skillful at pulling together into a satisfying whole what might have started out as distinct stories, though intrusions are a constant danger in a first-person narrative as intense as this one, and one that features a narrator who is self-absorbed to a fault. Matthew Vaber is also pathetic, self-destructive, judgmental, intelligent and too clever for his own good: in short, a very dislikable and also endearing creation—endearing because of the great force and liveliness Galanes has brought to all aspects of this work.

Galanes also invests his narrator with admirable qualities of perceptiveness and even a kind of gentleness, qualities that are at cross-purposes and are often overshadowed by the very broad strokes of the book's humor. Matthew is a kind of gay archetype but I'm pressed to say exactly which kind. He's as far beyond camp as both AIDS and the recovery movement have brought us, though the book doesn't shy away from a camp sensibility with chapter titles like "Chinchilla Jackets" and "Tennis Whites" and its many references to Hollywood movies. Galanes makes clear his desire to squeeze as much humor as he can from this grisly situation, if humor is the right word for it, so extreme are some of Galanes' lines. Certainly this book contains a number of laugh-out-loud moments, but the comic onslaught that this book embodies left me thinking that if the book's narrator could kill you with jokes, he would, gladly. The anger that underlies this kind of unremitting humor is evident. It's no accident that the lemon yellow sweater on the book's cover is shading into acid green.

What is also clear as the book moves toward its close is that the narrator's preoccupation with being funny, though it might get in the way of its character's resolutions, will ultimately learn to coexist with a new meaning of the trope Father's Day, which is to be found in a gathering at book's end that serves as a means of understanding a little more about and remembering the deceased. Mother and son in this book do ultimately lead each other to the other side of the body blow they have both received.

*Father's Day* is not in any way a simplistic book. I'd like to add also that the level of writing is so high that an inexact observation or phrase really stands out. For example, I'm incredulous that a 12-year-old would really say that it is easier to walk down a gravel path in high heels than baseball cleats. Even one who is about to be taunted to his face by his teammate with the title "Mathilda, the strikeout queen." The observation makes it easy for me to confuse the self-absorption of the narrator with that of the author and makes me a very little less well-disposed to this intense and intelligently written book.

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