

Dadolescence

by Bob Armstrong

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2011, ISBN: 978-0-88801-384-2, 227 pp., \$19 paper.

Reviewed by Graeme Voyer

Dadolescence is Winnipeg playwright Bob Armstrong's brilliant, comedic first novel. It is narrated in the first person by the main character, Bill Angus, a stay-at-home father working on a Phd in anthropology. Angus lives in Winnipeg with his wife, who supports the family with a job in human resources, and their twelve-year-old son.

The novel is an interesting experiment in the device of the unreliable narrator. Angus is subject to delusions of grandeur, even as he continually finds ways to avoid working on his thesis.

In a moment of hilarious bathos, Angus steels himself to write, to "distill everything I have learned through observation and trial and error, the wisdom bought at the price of blood, toil, tears, and sweat, into a single document that will bring enlightenment and hope to its readers" (34). But all he can produce is a two-paragraph article for the school newsletter called "Beating the Bag Lunch Blues."

Angus seems to be a slightly ridiculous figure, but there is also something admirable in his at least theoretical devotion to scholarship, his refusal to abandon his dreams and join the "real world" of gainful if mundane employment. As he says, "I wanted to make my own discovery, to observe a world that hadn't been dissected, to follow my curiosity regardless of anybody's agenda. I wanted something that addressed big questions of how people find meaning in their lives. I wanted to see the world through eyes other than my own and see it anew" (73). Surely these are worthy sentiments.

Angus has two neighbours and friends who are also stay-at-home fathers, and who are probably even more deluded than he is. Angus incorporates their plight into his research and plans an experiment that, he hopes, will disabuse them of their illusions. But unbeknownst to Angus, his wife is planning a similar wake-up call for him.

Readers who live in Winnipeg will enjoy the many references to local landmarks and institutions: the Red River Exhibition, the Bridge Drive-In, the Zoo, the Blue Bombers, the Winnipeg Folk Festival, and Rainbow Stage.

Dadolescence is entertaining and amusing. But like all good novels, it can be read on several levels. Beneath the surface humor, it raises profound questions about meaning and identity in contemporary North America. It is a packed, layered work that should be read more than once. ♡

Graeme Voyer is a Winnipeg writer.

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