

BOOKS

Review: 'Swim Home to the Vanished' finds a young man transformed by grief

FICTION: A young man's quest for understanding takes him to a very fishy village.

By Claude Peck (<https://www.startribune.com/claude-peck/6370648/>) Special to the Star Tribune

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Brendan Shay Basham's debut novel is an incantatory trip through place and time, fueled by grief and animated by magic.

Sometimes as intense and disorienting as a virtual reality excursion or a fever dream, the story begins as Damien, a man devastated by his younger brother's death, quits his job as a chef and sets off for parts unknown.

Walking through a rail yard, Damien "put his ear to the ringing steel and listened for the wheel discs a thousand miles away" and "feels the friction of a continent wiggle atop beams of tarred pine, the pain and yearning and endless chase for land and gold and blood over a wounded country."

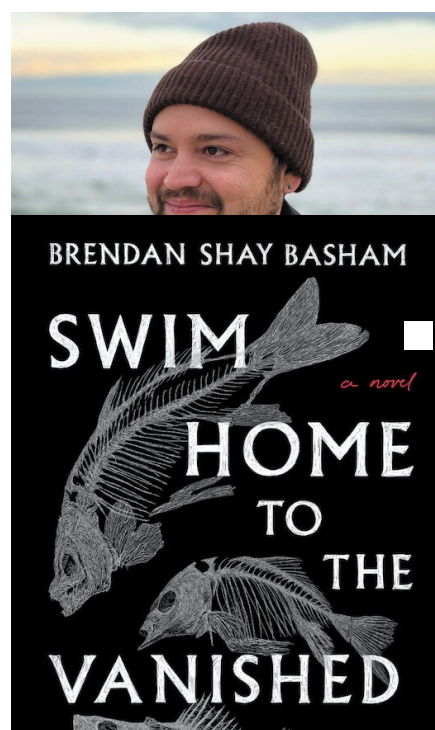
Right away, we know we are to be guided by a writer (Basham is Diné) with an ear for poetry who also is attuned to the lasting scars caused by westward colonial expansion in the United States.

Nature emerges as being no less important than people. Aquatic imagery abounds in Basham's sentences. A river has "black soil beneath" and is fed by "springs flowing from the depths of dormant volcanoes where whispering trout gossip in caves."

An old goatherd imparts sage advice, telling Damien that "time shifts for the grieving. Our bodies change; things don't quite appear the same anymore."

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In this context, it is odd but not that surprising when this desert sojourner feels fishlike gills developing behind his ears. Or that, arriving in a seaside fishing village, he meets a sorceress and her two daughters, each with a different take on the recent murder of



Carla, a third daughter.

The fable-like novel's middle sags beneath confusing story lines and clunky dialogue — word salad posing as ancient wisdom. The expanded cast of villagers steals focus from Damien's journey and we are left with only scant understanding about Damien's brother or the motives of Carla's killer.

Out of this emerge scenes full of natural wonder, deeply imagined and described in bravura prose, the novelistic equivalent of a big-screen final reel. Damien and one of the daughters travel to visit a woman in a wonderful, ramshackle jungle farm — one part Robinson Crusoe and two parts Dr. Seuss.

A giant tempest batters the coast. "The rain sounds as if it is being tossed at the house one barrel at a time." Epic flooding drowns many, even floating the dead from their hilltop graves. World-ender or slate-cleaner?

Reflections on grief are prolonged until it seems Damien's dead sibling is a stand-in for greater losses due to genocide and forced displacement of Indians that severed them from each other and their shared past. "What are we if all of our stories are erased?" Damien wonders.

"Swim Home to the Vanished" preserves some memorable stories, memorably.

Claude Peck is a former Star Tribune columnist and editor. His next review is of Emma Donoghue's "Learned by Heart."

Swim Home to the Vanished

By: Brendan Shay Basham

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