

BOOKS

Review: Friends and frenemies pursue life, love and MFAs at a Midwestern university

FICTION: Brandon Taylor follows grad school novel "Real Life" with another look at the lows of higher learning.

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

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In his second novel, Brandon Taylor moves his diverse cast of graduate students from Madison, Wis., to Iowa City as he continues his unsparing view of life in and around the Ivory Tower.

While the campus novel has a long tradition of airing the foibles of academia, Taylor's critique goes deeper. And darker.

The book's title hints that Americans are at some kind of end point, and that a wake is needed for such qualities as civility, sincerity, equity, love and hope.

The novel opens with a blazing, satirical look at a graduate seminar in creative writing. A young woman reads aloud a long confessional poem that sparks praise.

"I want this in my veins. Hard," says Helen.

Fellow student Seamus, however, finds the work pretentious, "the aping of poetry in search of validation." He mockingly asks its writer, "Are you a poet or a caseworker?" Things go badly from there.

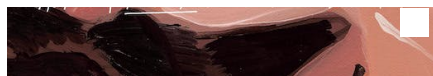
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We cut to Seamus' part-time job as a chef at a hospice, preparing mushroom bisque for terminal patients.

When describing skilled labor, Taylor's prose grows luminous, as when Seamus "peeled a fresh pile of onions, and pulled the knife through their bulk with one certain motion. He



loved that first bite of the knife through the material wet of the ingredients. He could read, in that very first moment, the final taste of the dish."



The novel's vivid opening chapter proceeds to a violent sexual encounter between Seamus and an exceedingly unpleasant man. It also raises intriguing questions about whether the young poet/chef is right or deluded in his view of contemporary literature.

Disappointingly, this promising Seamus story line almost disappears from "The Late Americans." The sole later chapter that returns to him also surges with fresh energy as it describes Seamus' feverish attempt to meet a graduation deadline with a poem he hopes has true significance.

Elsewhere, we drift almost plotlessly between potlucks and hookups involving a diverse cast of less-engaging twentysomethings: bickering gay couples, dance students, a music studies major, an MBA candidate, a blue-collar townie and a swim instructor.

Taylor writes keenly about race, class and homophobia in this circumscribed world. Even among supposed BFFs there are constant "microbetrayals," as one character calls them, that show how racism, in a supposedly liberal Midwestern college town, is never far from the surface.

These discussions dilute rather than strengthen any through-line promised at the novel's outset. So much hostility. So much hopelessness and self-loathing. Seamus says his circle is "inconsequential," "posturing all the time." Such assertions undercut our desire to relate. Few and far between, and often seemingly tacked on, are brighter epiphanies, their brevity often signaled by the phrase "in that moment."

The big ideas raised by Seamus — Is his condemnation of today's woke academic culture valid? Is he blinded by his whiteness? His sexism? What is the correct role of the contemporary artist? — resonate most strongly in the scattershot mix.

Claude Peck is a former Star Tribune columnist and editor.

The Late Americans

By: Brandon Taylor.

Publisher: Riverhead, 320 pages, \$28.

Event: [Talk of the Stacks \(https://hclib.bibliocommons.com/v2/events?q=Brandon%20Taylor\)](https://hclib.bibliocommons.com/v2/events?q=Brandon%20Taylor), in-person and virtual, 6:30 p.m. June 6, Minneapolis Central Library, 300 Nicollet Mall, free.

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