

IN THE LAND OF CHIAROSCURO

Gregory Hill, *East of Denver*. Dutton Adult, 2012.

Author Gregory Hill, in his first novel, delves into the heart-rending difficulties of suffering alongside a victim of Alzheimer's. Immersed in the daily life of the insular, rural town of Dorsey, Shakespeare Williams has quit his job and traveled east of Denver to care for his ailing father. Readers travel sympathetically alongside Shakespeare, for things prove to be more difficult than he could have imagined as he struggles to maintain his family's farm and care for his father.

From its first pages, *East of Denver* spins a tight web woven from its lovable, dysfunctional characters and hapless plot. No one in Dorsey really has it together. In fact, Dorsey is home to an entire cast of tragicomic characters including Vaghn Atkins, Shakespeare's longtime friend who, paralyzed in high school, is confined to his abusive mother's basement; Carissa McPhail, an overweight anorexic; and the drug-pushing grade-school bully, DJ Beckman. Shakespeare himself has quit his job, effectively leaving him without any prospects as a provider, and suffers from anosmia (that is, he has no sense of smell). He is incredibly loyal, however, and as a narrator almost instantly endears himself to the reader by his abrupt, realistic depictions.

As the novel opens, the reader accompanies Shakespeare Williams leaving Denver to return to the family farm in Dorsey with a simple purpose: he wants to bury his dead cat. Shakespeare and his father, Emmett, proceed to lay the former stray to rest alongside his childhood pets in a now-vacant pasture. As he spends more and more time with his widower father, Shakespeare begins to realize Emmett's health is no longer what it once was: he is forgetful, absent minded, and his behavior begins to be



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unaccountable—one has to chuckle when Emmett tries to pay a clerk for a six-pack of beer with a one-hundred dollar bill.

Only when Shakespeare finally walks through the doorway of his family's once-immaculate farmhouse does he realize the gravity of his father's situation. The house is in disrepair, things are broken, covered with filth, and in total disarray. Angered by the state of his childhood home, Shakespeare begins to poke about the mess. Unabelle, the kindly woman entrusted with regularly checking up on Emmett, has obviously not visited in weeks. Alarmed, Shakespeare begins searching. After finally gaining entrance to a locked bathroom, he discovers Unabelle bloated and dead in the bathroom.

Shakespeare finds that the finances of the farm are also in crisis. As Shakespeare begins to sort through old financial statements, he can find no receipts for funds his father should have been receiving from various government grants. Furthermore, as he

tours the estate, he notices the pronounced absence of his father's most prized possession: his Cessna airplane. Unable to rely on his father's memory, Shakespeare sets about investigating what happened to the plane. Through his conversations with various townspeople, the facts gently fall into place: The owner of the Keaton State Bank swindled his father out of his hard-earned assets, culminating in the purchase of the Cessna airplane at the absurd price of \$20. Shakespeare sees only one course of action: he must rob the Keaton State Bank.

The first few chapters tear by at an exhausting pace; although we are told that Shakespeare had known his father suffered from dementia, following him through his discovery of the desperate reality of his father's situation makes for gripping reading. As Hill spins his narrative, however, it becomes clear the novel's great strength is not its plot. After the opening chapters, the plot fades to the background as *East of Denver's* peculiar and intimate character development consumes the reader's attention. The loose plan to rob the Keaton State Bank provides, at best, an amusing goal through which the novel's characters come to life.

One central dynamic of the novel is the remarkable complementarity of Emmett and Shakespeare. Emmett counteracts Shakespeare's agricultural and mechanical ineptitude by providing a remarkable set of skills; Emmett can fix almost anything. Limited by his disease, though, Emmett relies completely on Shakespeare to keep him on task. In more than one scene in the novel, Emmett arrives to discover his son struggling in vain with a task or piece of machinery. Emmett takes over, and soon has defunct engines purring, and sundry menial objectives attained.

His inability to function independently provokes a complete role-reversal in which he becomes parented by his son, and his son must grow to be his fastidious caretaker. Although gradually succumbing to more severe senility, he has moments of clarity that mark the novel by their profundity. In fact, the conversations shared by Emmett and Shakespeare comprise the true heart of the

novel. The reader will voraciously consume their words as a sweet beverage, even as the darkness of despair and tragedy subtly lace every taste.

Through the dynamism of Shakespeare and Emmett's relationship and their interaction with the other inhabitants of Dorsey, *East of Denver* provokes unique reflections on the need for community. Shakespeare finds himself repeatedly turning to others for help. Even robbing the Keaton State Bank is a communal affair. Shakespeare relies a great deal on his father, as has been said, but his unruly band of intimates carries Shakespeare through his darkest moments in the novel. Shakespeare's companions find themselves galvanized by his presence and, dare I say, *vision*. Not only is Shakespeare in need of them, but his compatriots are deeply in need of Shakespeare. If he can be faulted for unoriginality, Hill's savvy use of detail and outrageous happenstance preserve these relationships from the tarnishes of small-town stereotypes.

The novel's end unravels as quickly as it began. The final pages careen like a car out of control, rendering the reader breathless. Hill thoroughly delivers as the novel collapses into a cataclysmic denouement. Again, rejecting any shallow sentimentality or predictability, *East of Denver* concludes with a finale even more captivating than the lightning storm of simple prose with which it began.

Unabashedly inelegant, Hill's novel is vulgar. The obscenities and occasional lasciviousness paint dark, cloudy images of characters in dire need of salvation. *East of Denver* flaunts the brokenness of humanity, and thus it is no surprise that a walk along the bleak road traveled by Emmett and Shakespeare Williams and their friends poignantly raises questions about the meaning of life, even the existence of God. Granting these musings the dignity they deserve, Hill refuses to proffer trite replies. Shakespeare is not the sort of pensive person who would otherwise devote much time to a "philosophy of life," but his circumstances force him to moments

of reflection. Accordingly, his philosophical thoughts allow the novel to manifest a profundity all its own.

In his time of need, Shakespeare turns to the only place he thinks he can find hope: his anomalous group of friends. He runs to them for support, and often they provide it. In the end, though, his friends can only offer so much. They, like Shakespeare, are consumed with the battle against their own demons. Brilliant rays of grace momentarily pierce the thick shell of the shadows of Shakespeare's life, but ultimately he cannot open himself wide enough to be truly transformed.

Hill's comic writing guarantees hilarity for his readers, but remains anchored by the reality and weight of Shakespeare's tragic situation. Shakespeare easily earns our empathy as he fights the grief and resentment so intimately known to anyone with a senile family member. *East of Denver* succeeds because it refuses to slide into maudlin optimism about man and his life on the earth, but tragically it offers very little in the way of salvation. From beginning to end, the novel's great achievement is Hill's gift of *characters*: people who are often broken, crumbling, and struggling, but always irresistible.

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