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The Meat And Spirit Plan



Synopsis

Like an experimentally inclined Annie Proulx, Saterstrom tersely renders the effects of social violence on individual lives . . . the effect is shattering and transcendent. "Modern Times Bookstore newsletter

In lyric, diamond-cut prose, Selah Saterstrom revisits the mythic, dead-end Southern town of Beau Repose. This time, the story follows a strung-out American teenager influenced by heavy metal, inspired by Ginger Rogers, hell-bent on self-destruction, and more intelligent than anyone around her realizes. She is forced into rehab and private school, and her life, at least on the surface, changes course, eventually leading to theology studies in Scotland. But as the feverish St. Vitus's dance of her adolescence morphs into slow-motion inertia abroad, an illness brings her home again to face the legacy of pain she left behind and to find a way to become the lead in a dance of her own creation.

An heir to William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, Saterstrom soars above the traditional boundaries of the American novel with exquisite, cut-to-the-quick language (Raleigh News & Observer) that makes her novels impossible to put down. Spare, raw, and transcendent, Saterstrom's unflinching examination of modern-day Dixie and contemporary adolescence lights up the dark corners of the American experience. Selah Saterstrom is the author of *The Pink Institution*, a debut novel praised across the country for letting gusts of fresh, tart air blow into the old halls of Southern Gothic (The Believer). A Mississippi native, she is currently on the faculty of the University of Denver's Creative Writing Program. Visit her website at www.selahsaterstrom.com.

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Customer Reviews

This dark first-person tale of youthful initiation by Mississippi-born Saterstrom (*The Pink Institution*) follows a feisty narrator from public housing in a backward Southern town to the sodden grit of university life in Glasgow. The young, unnamed narrator of these detached vignettes falls into bad company as her drug-addict mother largely disappears and her older sister introduces her to sex and booze. The narrator loses her virginity early on during a drunken bout with a football player and subsequently hangs out with half-Vietnamese friend Heather and her doped-up loser pals. It's not clear how, but after being sent to reform school, the narrator distinguishes herself in English, which opens the door to college in Big City, and later, to Scottish University, where she studies religion, delves into postmodern studies and hooks up with former heroin freak Ian. Her mother's death brings her home just in time for gallstones to send her to the hospital for a long stay. Through banter with night nurse Charlie (who calls her Ginger Rogers), she establishes a connection in the face of rupture and loss. Saterstrom's coming-of-age narrative is tough and unblinking, and the moments of clarity provide immense satisfaction. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Selah Saterstrom is the author of the novels *Slab*, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, and *The Pink Institution*, all published by Coffee House Press. Widely published and anthologized, she also curates *Madame Harriette Presents*, an occasional series. She teaches and lectures across the United States and is the director of Creative Writing at the University of Denver.

This novel goes through the dysfunctional life of the main character who often participates in uncouth sexual practices and binge drinking. The author is able to capture the social innocence of the main character as a young teenager which is juxtaposed with the mature actions she takes part in. There is a sense of surrealism in how the narrator observes actions, making the reader experience that much more interesting.

I picked this up last night and couldn't put it down, subconsciously compelled to read this amazing book from cover to cover in one sitting. Using compact, witty, and cathartic vignettes, Saterstrom transports the reader into the heart and mind of the nameless narrator, where the female heroine exposes her darkest secrets as if it's a ritual, a rite of passage, as we follow her through childhood to early adulthood. The succession of scenes act as snapshots, the flashbulbs exploding in the mind leaving the reader in awe.

This was my first book of fast fiction. My friend recommended *The Pink Institution* and I read *The Meat and Spirit Plan* first. It is my favorite book. I got it in the mail and started to read it and ended up finishing it an hour or so later. I already lent to a friend! I can't wait to read it again. I love the coming of age aspect and it's all so relatable. The author has a gift with words and imagery.

Saterstrom is genius, and this book changed the way I read novels.

This text embraces the coming-of-age story and takes it into new territory. Growing up is not just about finding the self, but it is about establishing a relationship between the "meat" and the "spirit," or in other words, about resolving the mind/body problem: trying to create a sense of a unified and whole entity, while the body is changing and the mind (spirit) is changing. This text is about process, and to evaluate this process, it steps outside the subject to look through and at the subject, but still from the position of the subject. It is an objective look at subjectivity in first person point-of-view. Perhaps it represents the confusion and disassociation that result from trauma. Coming-of-age is shown here as psychological trauma--and the body/mind separation that results. The subject becomes a witness, removed into a safer place, a place without feeling. The section titles say something in themselves: "Headbanger's Ball" juxtaposed with "Religious Studies," then "The Slaughterhouses of Glasgow," "Magic Tricks for a Hospital Setting," and "The Life of Ginger Rogers, by Ginger Rogers." Why the heavy-metal chapter titles? Maybe something about the rawness of the narrator's early life experience. And the violence. Clashing against everything, and needing to scream, but being unable to, so doing it vicariously through music. Catharsis. The titles correspond with her action, "I incised some narrow lines into my palms and between my fingers" (43). The separate passages--the fragmented nature of the form this text is presented to us in--this represents memory. It resembles recollections told to a therapist over a period of time--or a journal written after the fact, maybe. The "Religious Studies" section illustrates an attempt at college life. She is in a period of seeking, and immersed in an institution. The highly-structured environment may not work for her in a long-term way, but it has opened her into a new awareness, perhaps, at least in some small way. "The Slaughterhouses of Glasgow" shows her expanding out into a multi-cultural world. A certain violence still pervades this section, but it is not only matter-of-fact, like earlier in the book, but maybe even wry, humorous, or even slightly celebratory of the disparity she again finds herself immersed in. Instead of music, she finds expression in art, and sits in front of it, rather than talk or write her thesis: "Then I sit in front of it when I'm supposed to be at University library writing my

research thesis" (143-144). A slaughtered ox that represents so much for her--this metaphor is so colourful. "Magic Tricks for a Hospital Setting" transitions the narrator into a space of healing. She must look at her problems of metabolising/digesting her past. "The Life of Ginger Rogers, by Ginger Rogers" projects her experience into a setting of film. She becomes the film star--her only name in the book--and a surreal art film with a multi-cultural cast brings together her experience thus far. This film incorporates everything, such a variety and scope, and it contains the element of acceptance, rather than a pushing away, a clinging to, or an ignoring of experience. This so-called film finds a new language that includes all languages. Ginger Rogers becomes birth, life, old age, sickness, and death. The end.

This review is more or less random notes I took while reading, presented in no particular order...Saterstrom's work gets its power from metaphoric imagery as well as sentences whose rhythms embody, enliven, content, such as the forward-crash of the first line on page 90 which starts a new episode, as if the novel is taking a gasp of resurrecting air after the narrator's mom admits she's gone back to coke. This novel shows its author's attention to theme-plot and place (Beau Repose, Mississippi) and models the act of writing as a kind of (ancient) way of knowing. This work startles with its poetic clarity and intuitive strangeness of episode endings. Metaphors, especially those on pages 16, 18, and 99, enliven already powerful prose. Moments of insight, such as on page 130 that, for the narrator, "[faith] could be impure...", and other sections that are stream-of-consciousness-like, such as the thought spiral on page 24, are very enjoyable. Portentous imagery also appears, fueling theme-plot and diversions through imagery. The Geronimo section on 80 and Aztec song on 87 are nice. It made me wonder, though, where the character Jude had gone. I wished he would make a haunting reappearance. Overall, a very excellent work by a very capable writer. Highly recommended. Justin Nicholes Fiction Editor, Our Stories

Saterstrom's work, including her debut novel THE PINK INSTITUTION, is the finest work by a contemporary American writer that I have come across in quite awhile. Following in the strong Southern tradition of exceptional literature (William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, John Kennedy Toole) Saterstrom writes of a broken society struggling to rise from the ashes of its violent history, a society battling its overwhelming decay. Just as these traditions of extreme violence and decay persist, so does the individual voice of those who fight for a better life; the question is, who will win the battle?

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