



Book of the day

Filthy Animals by Brandon Taylor review – sexuality and suffering

Ian Williams

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American author Brandon Taylor follows his Booker-shortlisted debut novel, *Real Life*, with an impressive collection of linked short stories, *Filthy Animals*. His characters, like the postgraduate student Wallace at the centre of *Real Life*, preserve their composure externally while they splinter internally as Taylor constantly tests the membrane that separates our interior lives from the exterior world.

Taylor doesn't stray too far from the world he knows well: campuses, thesis projects, grad students who "talked about the historicity of women's diaries from the late early-modern period". He's not a young *Zadie Smith*, who emerged with the ability to write anybody of any age and culture. Many of his characters are queer. One of the collection's ambitions, it seems, is to smudge the line between straight and gay (another membrane) and to demonstrate how queer desire permeates various identity markers, including class.

The collection begins by corralling characters at the kind of party that writers love because it sets up tensions, contrasts personalities, establishes alliances and piques dramatic irony. At this party, Lionel, a black man who has recently come out of hospital, meets Charles and Sophie, two dancers in an open relationship. Five of the 11 stories in *Filthy Animals* track the trio's liaisons. Taylor plays the Lionel-Charles-Sophie storyline for all its awkwardness and resentment, but it can feel like a note held too long to suspend commitment, which is the resolution we're trained to expect.

The other stories rely less on recurring characters than they do on theme. A cluster in the middle share violent climactic scenes. "As Though That Were Love" is scored with horror music in its mood. It's the story where you shout: *Don't go up those stairs!* "Mass" will be taught on writing courses as an example of understatement. It exposes the violence men commit by the things they say, don't say and can't say. And the title story, well, there's no preparing for that. The violence is neither glamorous nor gratuitous; it is senseless without being pointless. In contrast, Taylor presents such earnest moments of vulnerability in "Anne of Cleves" that my breath hitched. I'd urge this story on anyone for the moment where a character cries out, in midwestern grammar: "Why don't anybody want me back. Why don't anyone ever want me."

Some writers have the gift of perfect pitch when writing dialogue; Taylor's gift is perfect tempo. In a band of writers, he'd be the drummer who sticks to a steady *moderato*. He neither rushes a story to its high notes nor drags the pace so that we can admire his voice. And as a plotter, he doesn't rely on gasp-inducing reveals. Coming out is not the constant climax – the single, story-worthy moment of queer life. When he focuses on that moment, as he does for the lesbian couple in "Anne of Cleves", he does so amid corresponding issues of self-discovery, disclosure, privacy and fluidity.

Taylor's superpower is compressing a lifetime of backstory into a paragraph – sometimes just a sentence. Charles remembers "being shoved into a locker by a bunch of lacrosse jerks who got drunk on their dads' boats and drowned on lazy summer nights". There's a whole unwritten story of disease and contagion buckling the ground of "As Though That Were Love". Taylor doesn't need to say much to us in these late pandemic days about the fine line between life and death (another membrane). He adroitly manipulates the forward momentum of these stories by adding weight to the past. A character's history opens like a loose parachute behind him, so that even as he tries to move forward in life, the drag of the past determines his pace.

I've come to expect, in fiction, the story of the Sad Gay Youth who is rejected by his often religious family and thereafter becomes self-destructive or reckless. And while Taylor refracts versions of this story throughout the collection, he does so without overly romanticising it. No doubt, the Sad Gay Youth makes better fiction than the Gay Gay Youth. But like the tragic

“mulatta” of 19th-century American literature or heroines such as Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, who are punished for having desires, the too-frequent pairing of sexuality and suffering inscribes queer life as destined for loneliness, alienation, crippling introspection and outsider status, and positions the queer subject as a perpetual object of pity.

But in Taylor’s case, that’s more warning than criticism. He is a writer of enormous subtlety and of composure beyond his years.

● *Ian Williams is the author of [Reproduction \(Dialogue\)](#) and the forthcoming essays [Disorientation: Being Black in the World](#). *Filthy Animals* is published by Daunt (£9.99). To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.*