*Survival House*, by Wendell Mayo rev. by Shaughn Hull

Stephen F. Austin University Press

*Survival House* is a delightful testament to author Wendell Mayo’s imagination and craft, as the collection of short fiction brings to life the seemingly impossible duality of being innately human amongst the uncanny and abstract. While Mayo sets these stories against the grandiose backdrops of nuclear apocalypse, Russian Oligarchy, and Cold War mania, you shouldn’t let the extravagant contexts pigeonhole your expectations for plot, characters, themes, and tone. Rather, the stories are intimately human, as you’re more likely to find a young girl’s darkly comedic mission to become “The Most Hated Kid” in school than to be drawn into a JFK conspiracy. Mayo’s worlds and history will draw you in, but it’s the connections to the characters that holds you close.

The stories in *Survival House* are strung together by the aforementioned historical context around 1960’s Americana, through the subtle reuse of characters in multiple stories and, most importantly, the impactful human themes hinged on family and the human need for relationship. The opening story, “Doon Town,” is set in a post-apocalyptic mid-western town of the same name. This dust bowl town is a surreal ode to nuclear holocaust, and the story sets the collection’s tone: you find yourself lost in a place that is eerie and foreign, and, akin to a car crash, you can’t turn away as the eccentric yet relatable characters play out subtle tensions that pose big questions about human existence and what it means to live. The rest of the stories carry the same approach in pronouncing internal tensions over intricate plot, and though the settings aren’t as surreal as “Doom Town,” they do maintain the same car crash affinity through the uniquely woven presence of the Cold War.

Another fun way a few of the stories are tied together is through the slight reuse of characters in various stages of their lives; subtle hints give you the feeling that the grey-haired former school teacher nicknamed Maude Roller in “Doom Town” is also Miss Suratt, the younger junior high teacher from “The Big Healy.” These quiet parallels highlight the complexity of the characterization, adding another layer of engagement and connectedness as you begin to track the lifespans of the characters across the entirety of the collection. You see main characters from one story pop in as second and tertiary characters in another while you wander landscapes as disparate nuclear test sites, NASA jet propulsion labs, and Russian nuclear silos. Mayo’s true motive may be to comically navigate the deep relatable tensions around the nuclear family, fidelity, marriage and parenting.

Mayo’s prose is sharp, as well. In “The Trans-Siberian Railway Comes to Whitehouse,” the facetious Ana details her grandmother’s conception and her relation to Russian Oligarchy.

*“Trotsky, Bronstein, whatever,” Ana said and went on: “My great-grandmother was a maid aboard the steamship Montserrat out of Barcelona…1962…the thick-browed Bolshevik impregnated her…doggy style while discoursing on the ‘dictatorship of the working class,’ how we can all be dictators, like, together. Then he came in her...he looked puzzled, limp-dicked, and said to her, ‘Come to think of it you are the only one who does any work on this capitalist-rust-bucket…So, I guess you’re in charge.’”*

This taut but bouncy prose applies to character descriptions, as well. Though “MISS ATOMIC BOMB 1957” is only a fun aside, her description embodies Mayo’s approach to characterization by showcasing a larger than life personality with practical defects:

*“An elderly woman…platinum blonde, in a nude body stocking over which cotton wads adhere…shaped like a mushroom cloud. She’s thick with makeup and lipstick…she smiles cheesecake at me, like an explosion of personality…then shoots her arms skyward and says, ‘Whoosh!’ Loose muscle flaps beneath her withered biceps.”*

This complexity of character is greatly pronounced through the flawed first-person narrators, as all but the final story in the collection are told in this manner. Many of the most important tensions in the stories are predicated on the internal anxieties of their flawed first-person perspectives, and we are given unfiltered access to their often peculiar, erratic, or pretentious thoughts. You might think these thoughts would villainize the narrators, yet Mayo artfully creates empathy for his characters. This is seen in “Cherry Pie.” While at a local diner, after two young boys turn down a slice from him, the narrator laments, “*I would be falsely accused, hounded by police, questioned, held in ridicule, photographed, good name spread ignominiously across the Internet.”* These thoughts are laughable, yet with the intelligence and intricacy in which the tensions escalate, there arises a surprising relatability.

Wendell Mayo has crafted a truly unique collection of stories. These stories are unconventionally comedic and will simultaneously intrigue your mind and pull at your heart, as he reimagines ominous periods of history through the zany minds of zany characters. Throughout *Survival House*, you laugh at, are appalled by, and feel great empathy for these beautifully flawed and eccentric characters as they deal with problems likely akin to those you often face yourself.