*Bloomland*, by John Englehardt rev. by Shaughn Hull

Dzanc Books

John Englehardt is fearless and timely in his debut novel, *Bloomland.* He confronts, head on, our growing epidemic of mass shootings, and more specifically an estranged and isolated shooter on a college campus. Diving deep into the lives of those closes to the tragedy, including the shooter himself, Englehardt explores the minutia of internal conflict and life circumstance that could lead to such a violent act, but more so presents questions around the victims lives beyond the violence and if it is ever possible to forgive.

Set mainly in America’s Bible Belt at the fictional college, Ozarka University in Arkansas; *you* follow Eddie (a professor), Rose (a student) and Eli (the shooter) as each navigate their own coming of age amongst the scars of broken families and complicated relationships. “Our personalities are deep wells into which the world will drop, ideas, desires, even other people. So, you have to be careful. You have to know what was down there in the first place.” And careful, Englehardt is. Careful in approaching the subject with an honesty that creates empathy but also with a pragmatism that refrains from condoning the violence. In discovering “what was down there in the first place,” we draw lines of similarity between each characters back story, but also see that not everyone has the same starting point, that life is not fair. “Your’re too convinced of the absence of monsters…Maybe he (Eli) shouldn’t be allowed to stand beside an event like that and take credit for what happened. After all, no one has had the luxury of starting from the beginning – not even you.” We are asked to consider that Eli is not a monster but is a confused kid that has been enclosed into a dark corner of past loss too black to see, caught in a web of childhood trauma too sticky to untangle. “‘Eli did seemed troubled,’ I say, ‘but so do many of the students. They go through a lot.’ And though this is true, it’s true in the way all dark roads can look familiar, even when they aren’t.” These types of enlightening epiphanies on the human condition are woven throughout the novel and challenge common perspective and engage the reader on multiple levels.

The novel is immersive. Immersive in its polarizing tensions and unnervingly authentic characters but also in the way Englehardt approaches point of view, with the second-person, *you.* A novel in the second person is rare as it is hard to express that voice in an authentic way, so this approach feels unprecedented as each chapter in the novel rotates between the three main characters story threads and is narrated by what at first feels like an uninvolved narrator but is then slowly revealed to be a tenured English professor at Ozarka University, who is addressing each character individually. This is a masterful way to ground the second person voice within the world, and the beauty of the second person voice is in its universality. Though the world Englehardt depicts is detailed and authentically textured (Englehardt graduated from University of Arkansas), there is a feel that this story could happen to anyone, anywhere and he brings us, as readers, into the world of the story like we are the characters themselves. That you, as a reader, could potentially experience something similar in your own life. Reminding us that we live in a time where acts of mass violence are becoming more and more common. It is a scary thought, but it is necessary to consider within any discourse regarding active shooters or acts of terror in general.

*Bloomland*, the winner of the Dzanc Prize for Fiction, is a thoughtful and beautifully crafted lens into the complexity of life that births violence and tragedy. It is needed and relevant in a time where the masses gravitate towards or point the lens at heated political climates and questions around gun control. Yet Englehardt strips all that away and asks the intimate human question: How should *you*, move forward after the wreckage?

 I highly recommend you give it a read.