*April Warnings* by Mark Pleiss rev. by Jasmine Venegas

Veliz Books

Mark Pleiss is an author, educator, and critic from Omaha, Nebraska. He publishes fiction, book reviews, scholarly criticism, and essays with some work that has appeared in *Tupelo Quarterly, Colorado Review, Pop Matters, The Omaha Pulp, Sequel, Fine Lines,* and more. Pleiss has worked as a freelance journalist for *The Omaha World-Herald* and *The Des Moines Register* before teaching at St. Olaf College, the University of Colorado Boulder, and Metro State University Denver. He currently writes from Denver with his most recent published collection of short stories, *April Warnings. April Warnings* takes on a new perspective on Midwestern parables and rituals while also including elements of science fiction that bring the world of Baxter County to life.

In this collection of short stories that are interconnected with one another, the characters take on the responsibility of questioning their lives and their surrounding home area of Baxter County while facing vicious storms and tornadoes. Baxter County is home to the Callahan farmer family, the Milliken drunk and his lost son, a dishonest mayor, the patient Chief, and many others who all seek the truth of the rural area that is home to mystery, suspicion, alien beliefs, and corruption. Each story focuses on one or more characters and their survival of the tornado that caused lots of damage to the people and homes of Baxter. Pleiss offers big tensions and small tensions that support the overall plot of the stories, the tornado and severe weather are the obvious issues all characters face while there are also personal problems that lead the characters to question their faith, time, purpose in life, and the existence of aliens. These stories are full of character complexity, imagery, and world building with every character and problem being faced with no piece of the story being left behind. Pleiss was able to do this successfully with the even balance of scene and summary. In “Chief” (Part I), the story introduces the character of Chief who is the new sheriff in town and it is clear that he has had a rough past before becoming Chief of Baxter. Pleiss doesn’t allow much room for backstory, but he does include the necessary information in order for the reader to completely understand what Chief has gone through. This balance can be seen in the beginning of “Chief” (Part I):

*The doctors put Chief back together, but he couldn’t play like before. He moved back*

*to the reservation to live with family and took odd jobs when he was healthy enough to*

*work. Chief got his break one afternoon when he was approached by an aging man with*

*a gun, a limp, and a badge.*

Pleiss effectively includes what the reader needs to know about Chief's past quickly to reserve room for the scenes that follow, further building the tensions and plot of the collection.

Another effective element that is seen throughout the collection is Pleiss’ use of imagery. He uses textured language that lets the reader sense the space around characters interacting. For example, in the “Snipe Hunting” story that follows the Callahan family, a grandson is in conversation with his grandpa who tells a story of aliens while chewing and spitting tobacco that is “thick and black, like used coffee grinds spilled from a filter, and it stains [his] shoelaces.” With details of tobacco, a rosary, and the rural landscape within this short story, it helps the reader get a better view of what characters they are learning about and where they come from that has shaped their values.

Mark Pleiss successfully gathers all the characters together in the last couple stories of the collection that have gathered at a funeral over the loss of many Baxter residents. It is in the ending scenes that characters reveal the vulnerable, true sides to them that create a full image of Baxter County and what is hidden within it.