

Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me,
by John Weir
Red Hen Press

rev. By Jocelyn Hancock

John Weir is an American author from New Jersey, now residing in Brooklyn, New York where he teaches as an associate professor at Queens College CUNY's MFA program for creative writing and literary translation. He identifies as a gay, cisgender white male, and highlights this existence in his published works. His first novel is *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*, published in 1989 and winner of that year's Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Debut Fiction. To the parents of a closeted gay boyfriend at the time, Weir once described his novel as "A boy's action-adventure novel that ends in tears", though the reality of the novel went into vivid detail about a gay man severely suffering from AIDS. His second novel is *What I Did Wrong*, published in 2006. He released his latest novel *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me* in April, which won this year's 2022 Grace Paley Prize in Short Fiction.

Your Nostalgia is Killing Me is a linked collection of short stories, each chronicle following the life of the unnamed protagonist - a gay, cisgender white male from New York - from the adolescence of high school up until his late fifties. Along with his life, Weir ties the collection together with the protagonists' different stages of grief: before, during, and after the death of his best friend, Dave, at the height of the AIDS epidemic. The protagonists' back and forth, love and hate relationship with Dave seems to be the theme of this collection as we gain more insight to his life experiences. Weir weaves through the protagonist's difficulties of losing Dave to AIDS, of growing up as a lonely homosexual, and navigating a series of complex affairs in the realm of love and romance.

The title of the novel is a story in itself, brilliant in the way traumatic nostalgia resonates with the survivors and those affected by the damage of the AIDS epidemic. Weir conveys the suffering of this era well, concluding the first story with harrowing depth:

"He (Dave) wants them to know what it's like to have the worst thing happen, to lose everything and never discuss it, so that you lose it twice, both in the moment, when it actually goes, and afterward, in the official record of its going. So two things are gone, Davis is gone and you're gone. And maybe you get a moment to cry for what, now, you will never be able to tell: that all the people you loved for a reason had died, and that you, for years and years after, quite simply, had not."

The narrator in Weir's novel is cleverly written, without a doubt. His name also happens to be John, suggesting an element of nonfiction autobiography. Weir gives us a vulnerable glimpse into the male gaze, one that isn't particularly touched on in the media's portrayal of masculinity. While this character's sexuality is a large piece of the novel, Weir is able to separately capture

the narrator's complex feelings towards his cisgender male identity - highlighting emotions that are certainly not uncommon for any man. He emphasizes the condemned topic of loneliness in manhood:

“Women are supposed to be lonely. Doomed to loneliness, without men... I grew up thinking I would be a lonely woman who missed men. I didn't learn until later how lonely *men* are. Lonely for other men. Lonely because they're forced to *be* men”

The complexities of identity, sexuality, and grief carry significant roles as the story progresses, the damage of each of them bleeding into the narrator's romantic and personal life. It's fascinating to read into his past traumas, and witness the effects of them play out in the span of his existence. He often runs into trouble when it comes to romantic relationships, potentially due to his unsaid love for Dave. At one point he says:

“I don't cheat; I just scam. I'm monogamous until the minute I'm not, and then I'm gone”

These themes ultimately lead to a strong climax at the end of the story, concluding with the narrator's reflection on his upbringing as a lonely and outed homosexual. He attempts to overpower the damage his trauma has caused, and Weir skillfully accomplishes this by the final line.

From the first story in the collection, beginning with the complex aftermath of Dave's death, to the last, ending with the protagonist looking back on his life, *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me* is a bittersweet collection of what it means to discover and rediscover, to love and lose, and to let go of the weight that haunts us.