*The Groundhog Forever*, by Henry Hoke rev. by Natalia Sanchez

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Brought up in the South, Henry Hoke received his MFA in creative writing from the California Institute of the Arts. To date, he has released five novels, with his most recent work being his novel *Open Throat*. He has been published in *The Offing*, *Carve*, *Electric Literature*, *Hobart*, and more, and also received the Subito prose prize. Hoke currently teaches scriptwriting at the University of Virginia’s Young Writers Workshop. Through all of his writings, Hoke mirrors an environment based on the comfortable variations in life by means of stimulating suspense to surprise, spinning a soup of emotions.

Hoke’s fiction novel explored in review here, *The Groundhog Forever*, accompanies two film students living in early 2000s Manhattan. As the title implies, the students become trapped in the day that they meet well-known actor, Bill Murray, while Murray is screening his film *Groundhog Day* during class. The premise is strange and amusing, and the narrative plays out in a warm and meaningful way. As with *Groundhog Day*, this story is told progressively through a single-day loop with minor differences each day.

The main characters are friends–a woman nicknamed “Thing 1” and a man nicknamed “Thing 2,” yet they are thought of as girl and boy by those around them. Both are queer and are figuring themselves out in the big city, hence their comfort with being referred to as they are. The film program at their university sees them as inseparable; they were given their nicknames by a professor who noticed that they wear similar clothes and have the same “swoop of a hairstyle.” They do hold one difference: Thing 1 is a brown woman and Thing 2 is a white man. All the characters in this story are acknowledged throughout with given nicknames as everyone knows one another, but the reader wonders exactly how well. Bill Murray is called “The Divine Bill” as many present at the screening view him as a holy being. Other characters are referred to as “The Italian” and “The Waterboys.”

Every character in the novel is given enough attention to feel empathy for their situation. The influential character of Bill Murray in this story is strong, serious, and fun, being one of the key entertainers. Outside of class, the two characters follow Bill and when they enter their repeating day, they begin to use the movie star by understanding the differences they can make to better understand their dilemma. Hoke organizes his character of Bill to be the main influence that surrounds Thing 1 and Thing 2, where the actor is seen as an almighty being while the novel still acknowledges that he is still a person just like the rest of them.

As the novel encircles the lives of two students, Hoke effectively captures the strange experiences that many at that age encounter: the exploration of relationships, romantic and/or intimate. Thing 1 and Thing 2 are close and have been perceived by their classmates to be in love. Yet, when they shoot kissing scenes, they illustrate this love for themselves rather than for the other that brings fascination for those who watch.

The novel explores concepts of personal growth as the main characters are caught in a loop, searching for meaning—which is bound to come. “The movie ended and life started,” Hoke writes, highlighting the beginning of the inevitable chaos of life. Hoke also dwells on the importance of art and how it survives even in impossible circumstances. Here, while the focus is on film and the characters’ admiration of it, the key theme is art: “They were artists above all,” Hoke writes, speaking to more fundamental creativity.

Toward the end of the novel, Hoke decides to heighten the structure by engaging with the use of poetry within the narrative to slow down and further engage the reader. The poetic forms show the reference of personification of God as a woman, yet there is no capitalization towards the pronoun “she,” bringing a challenge-like approach as this novel centers the idea of the impossible and the centered perspective toward immortality.

The depth of *Groundhog Forever* is strong. Even though it is presented through a fun concept, there are moments where emotions of distress and sadness pervade, as well as serious questions about immortality. Hoke even considers the idea of the absence of consequence when dealing with the everlasting. “Violence inside them swelled and abated,” he writes, momentarily expressing the idea that even though life isn’t always polite, such impoliteness should not lead toward inappropriate behavior—instead, it’s an opportunity to begin a deeper understanding of self. These are fascinating ideas—including, too, Hoke’s considerations about how limiting it is to be living in either the past or the future while highlighting just how welcoming it is, or should be, to be living in the present.

*The Groundhog Forever* creates an atmosphere that brings sharp questions about the promises life seems to make to us all. While the novel leans on the film *Groundhog Day*, it doesn’t entirely rely on it; reading this creates a strange journey for the audience less familiar with the film. Still, Hoke successfully brings in any reader interested in the unsettling questions of our shared existences.