



After the Parade

Lori Ostlund

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From Flannery O'Connor and Rona Jaffe Award winner Lori Ostlund, a debut novel about a man who leaves his longtime partner in New Mexico for a new life in San Francisco, launching him on a tragicomic road trip and into the mysteries of his own Midwestern childhood.

Sensitive, big-hearted, and aching self-conscious, forty-year-old Aaron Englund long ago escaped the confines of his Midwestern hometown, but he still feels like an outcast. After twenty years under the Pygmalion-like direction of his older partner Walter, Aaron at last decides it is time to stop letting life happen to him and to take control of his own fate. But soon after establishing himself in San Francisco—where he alternates between a shoddy garage apartment and the absurdly ramshackle ESL school where he teaches—Aaron sees that real freedom will not come until he has made peace with his memories of Morton, Minnesota: a cramped town whose four hundred souls form a constellation of Aaron's childhood heartbreaks and hopes.

After Aaron's father died in the town parade, it was the larger-than-life misfits of his childhood—sardonic, wheel-chair bound dwarf named Clarence, a generous, obese baker named Bernice, a kindly aunt preoccupied with dreams of The Rapture—who helped Aaron find his place in a provincial world hostile to difference. But Aaron's sense of rejection runs deep: when Aaron was seventeen, Dolores—Aaron's loving, selfish, and enigmatic mother—vanished one night with the town pastor. Aaron hasn't heard from Dolores in more than twenty years, but when a shambolic PI named Bill offers a key to closure, Aaron must confront his own role in his troubled past and rethink his place in a world of unpredictable, life-changing forces.

Lori Ostlund's debut novel is an openhearted contemplation of how we grow up and move on, how we can turn our deepest wounds into our greatest strengths. Written with homespun charm and unceasing vitality, *After the Parade* is a glorious new anthem for the outsider.

After the Parade Details

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From Reader Review After the Parade for online ebook

Esil says

I found *After the Parade* a beautiful sad slow read. It starts with Aaron leaving Walter after 20 years together. Walter is much older than Aaron and had taken him in as teenager after Aaron's mother disappeared. The book is a back and forth between what led Aaron to Walter, and what happens to Aaron after he leaves Walter. In the past, we learn about Aaron's harsh father, his troubled mother, his brief stay with an ultra religious aunt and uncle, and his complex feelings of gratitude and ennui vis-a-vis Walter who seemingly rescued him from a life of isolation and neglect. In the present, we see Aaron trying to make a new life for himself in San Francisco, where he struggles to free himself from dwelling on the past, still troubled by what happened to his mother and feelings of guilt about leaving Walter. Throughout, Aaron's narrative is populated by observations of people he has known who have made an impression on him, people who also appear to have led quiet troubled lives. I found that there was a pervasive sadness to this book. Ostlund is a very skilled writer -- writing beautiful prose and creating subtle feelings. This made for a book that felt like it had to be read slowly -- a book I had to put down every now and then to spark myself with something more "in your face". This isn't really a criticism but a warning that this is a book a bit more about atmosphere than what happens -- although there are a few powerful stand out scenes, especially during Aaron's childhood. I also have a book of Ostlund's short stories waiting for me which I will be happy to read given the quality of her writing and human observation. Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy.

Helene Jeppesen says

4.5/5 stars.

This is a truly beautiful story about the peculiar patterns life can take, and how those patterns can sometimes seem confusing and bewildering. It took me some time to get into this story about Aaron, whom we meet just after he has made a major decision to leave his life partner, Walter, and move to San Francisco. But once the plot moves back and forth between his childhood and the present, I really got into it and started loving and caring for Aaron.

"*After the Parade*" is a peculiar title, because after the parade, then what? However, the book gives you the answer and I like how it comes with its twists and turns. It turns into a story not just about Aaron but also about the people around him and how they have affected him as well as he has affected them.

This novel was beautiful, on the inside as well as on the outside (I love that cover!). It was my first novel by Lori Ostlund but based on this, it's not going to be my last by her.

Shawn Mooney says

A deeply felt novel about a sensitive late-30s gay man who leaves his lover of two decades and moves to San Francisco to reinvent himself. But for the wounds of his childhood—which surface with a vengeance—everything would've been fabulous; what happens instead is narrated with a deep, aching beauty that just might restore your faith in fiction. Not to mention humanity. A stunning debut.

My BookTube video review: <https://youtu.be/Dg0wHL7J9Y8>

Jenny says

*He saved me knowing that there is no stronger way to bind another human being to you than by saving him.
This is why I must leave.*

The day that Aaron Englund adds the 149th reason to his list of 'grievances' is the day (or rather night) that he'll get into a car and drive off, without goodbyes. He'll leave behind a life and his partner Walter, whom he'd been with for 20 years ever since Walter saved him, offering him a way out of his small Minnesota town, paid for his education and filled the void his absent parents left behind.

And so he packs up his belongings and drives to San Francisco, where he takes a job teaching English as a second language and finds a place to live in a tiny converted garage-apartment.

Going further into the book, more and more of the story belongs to Aaron the child and his memories of childhood with his abusive father and an increasingly withdrawn and depressed mother. Past and present coexist very closely in this book, and they unfold quite slowly with nuance, subtlety and an extraordinary talent for crafting secondary-characters. In fact: I can't remember a single book I've read in recent years, where I've been so drawn to the stories of people appearing in a novel for only a short span of time, but for long enough to allow a glimpse into their story, into what makes them tick.

Maybe it is here where the writer of short stories shines through the most: the precision and generosity with which she will give just the right amount of space to a character to become fully fleshed out and not merely an anecdote.

*You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down.*

Poetry is omnipresent in Lori Ostlund's first novel, and it is one more reason I so fell in love with this book. The lines above are from a Richard Hugo poem called 'Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg' and they keep re-appearing throughout the book like little landmarks.

Next to the underlying theme of leaving and arriving, of solitude and the desire to connect, it is language and the ability or disability to communicate that play a major role in 'After the Parade'. There's this wonderful anecdote, illustrating how just the lack of a small white space between two words can lead to major misunderstandings, when one of Aaron's ESL students writes a love letter that reads "*I want you near meat all times*".

It seems that Aaron's love of language is only matched by his fear of it. The fear of getting it wrong. In a letter to Walter he explains his deep passion for foreign, obscure words entirely useless to him.

...it was only in tossing around those useless words - blurting them out to children on trains and to the spouses of your colleagues as we sat together at interminable dinners - that I truly felt I was communicating, letting everyone know how far I was (and would always be) from ever being able to say anything that I really meant or needed to say.

Highly recommended.

With many thanks to NetGalley and Scribner for the ARC.

Sofia says

Those who know me know of my love for the quiet read. And this was **so so quietly TRIUMPHANT**. Made me happy.

On a first layer it's quite a mundane everyday story, a story like our own personal ones. But on a second layer this is a hero quest. Where Aaron our quiet hero goes on a quest through life wrestling with his own demons and meeting fantastical creatures on the way. Ostlund is able to reach in and bring out uniqueness and beauty from each and everyone of us, so we, the unseen become the seen, like Clary, or Bill or Winnie. And each of us have our own quest to follow, nobody is cast aside, left at the wayside.

I'm glad to have followed Aaron in his quest and that when the time for choice came, he chose happiness.

❀Aimee❀ Just one more page... says

I liked *After the Parade* but I've been sitting on this review so I could ponder it a bit.

Aaron leaves his partner of 20 years at the beginning of the book. Readers not only go along with him on his current new beginning, but we are slowly invited into the memories of his childhood. Between both narratives, we begin to understand what things have shaped Aaron and understand the longing of wanting to belong, to understand himself and others, and to know what is next in his life.

I was fascinated at the main character's thought processes. As a child, he tried his best to understand turns of phrase and "sayings", but being only five, he could only guess. He grows up sensitive and friendly to those others might shun, but always finding himself suffering the cruelty of others and circumstance. It is a story of how resilient some children can be in order to survive. But now, Aaron doesn't just want to survive; he wants more out of life...finally.

Before he was five, he grew up with an abusive father that he could never please. His mother tried to keep him from the violence. After his father dies, things are still difficult. Then the unthinkable happens, his own mother leaves in the middle of the night, never to return. We continue to meet new people throughout his life that help or hinder him - but all contribute to Aaron's life.

The story is told in flashbacks to his memories as though he is going through them one by one looking for answers. This is Aaron putting the pieces together for the first time in order to see where he was and where he wants to go.

So many many times I wanted to befriend the main character. My own children think a lot like Aaron. They want so much to understand this world and often have such an interesting way of making sense of it. Their observations delight me. Unlike Aaron's mother, my husband and I take such glee out of hearing what they think and then helping them understand the world around them.

I love that Aaron teaches ESL. As a child, Aaron was always confused by phrases in English that don't make a lot of sense unless explained. When you grow up in a toxic home, "normal" body language and social behavior can be foreign. As an adult, Aaron helps teach adults so many of these things that were so

unfathomable to him when he was young.

In both narratives Aaron makes so many astute observations of the language and human behavior. He notices things that so many others do not. Though it often ached, I enjoyed getting to know Aaron immensely.

Though at first I wanted a bit more from the ending, what we are given is true to the book. (view spoiler)

Thank you Netgalley for a free digital copy in exchange for an honest review.

Lolly K Dandeneau says

"This fumbling in the dark is how life will always be."

Could there be a more perfect sentence? I have to say the book is far more than it's summary. I thought I would just be reading a story about a man moving on from his partner, and while this is true- the story reaches into his past and in the process the reader brushes against other interesting characters. The novel manages to be a heartbreaking, disturbing look at family and the burdens of love. Did I say that? Of course I did, those who save us can sometimes cement us to their side, in a place we'd rather shake off. It's not just about being a homosexual, though there is that, and it certainly is something any human being can relate to. Ostlund is a hell of a writer! I cringed, my heart sank and every character engaged me. I wanted to jump in and punch a certain father in the face, I wanted to be the bubble protecting Aaron, and of course I fell in love with Clary because he fascinated me. People say and do horrible, soul crushing things in here. Lori Ostlund exposed the ostracism gay men faced in a far less accepting time, even more so a young boy with a father that would beat his son's difference right out of him. It's easy to think 'this is fiction' but some of us know this is a mirror of real life. Maybe I relate to the outcasts. I was embarrassed for them, I shared their wounds, I understood the fight in those who have no choice but to take what's forced on them. Even Aaron's damaged mother made me feel empathy. These characters were almost too real, too raw and just the way I like them. What touched a nerve in me was Aaron's father, the way Ostlund didn't just describe him as an 'angry man' but expressed it through his behaviors, prejudices, and treatment of his wife and child. I saw a bit of myself in Aaron, and other people in his father. People who have lived with anger can understand the line. "Aaron had never learned to be comfortable with anger- because of his father, he supposed- though Walter's anger was nothing like his father's. Walter did not get angry often, but when he did, he did not hide it from the world. On the contrary, anger was Walter's way of getting everyone else to see what was right. It was a public event. Aaron understood all of this. He did. But understanding it did not change the way he felt, and the way he felt was sick inside every time he witnessed anger-not just Walter's- or felt it rising in himself. He preferred to think of himself as someone who did not get angry, except that he did, his anger seeping out in small bursts of sarcasm or heightened politeness." There is something so violent about the atmosphere around angry people, whether you are the object of their hostility or just a bystander. It is sickening, it is a constant knot in your gut, your hackles raised, a fight or flight response waiting even when they are laughing and happy because you never know when a wave of rage will come crashing, sucking everything out in the sea of their misery. You are never at ease, you are never comfortable in your own skin, you walk on razor's edge, forget eggshells, you are robbed of security, love, peace. Is it any wonder the reaction would be introversion, a yearning for solitude when such children grow up? Those who can't escape know the sickness of certain emotions, and that is why even when Aaron sheds the too tight, old skin of his past- it still clings inside. Through Clarence we get a taste of the bullying Aaron gets from his peers, and the sage thoughts Clary shares moved me. We should all have a Clary, tusks and all and It's a shame many of us don't. Sometimes just one person can put a brand in our heart and gives us air when we're drowning, people whose very words

live on in our heads long after we've met them. Sadly, horrible people leave their rot and stink behind too. I can go on gushing forever about this novel, and I don't even care much if other's don't love it as much as me. I truly look forward to reading future novels by this incredibly talented author. I can't recommend it enough!

Diane S ? says

Aaron leaves his partner, a man who he has spent much of his life with. He leaves him in the middle of the night, U-haul packed and ready to go.

There is something so intimate, so real and heartbreaking about these characters. The author treats them and their stories with a great deal of sympathy. As Aaron tires to make it in San Fran, we learn about his past, his abusive father, his non descript mother and those who tormented and bullied him. We meet new people along with him, others we come to care about, want to know their stories. Aaron, however can not truly move forward until he comes to terms with his past.

A very warm, realistic and heartbreaking story. Ostlund is a natural born storyteller, can't wait to see what she does next.

Thomas says

An earth-shattering in a silent way kind of book. Lori Ostlund's debut novel follows forty-year-old Aaron Englund, a sensitive and self-conscious ESL teacher who leaves his relationship of 20 years to move to San Francisco. Though Aaron escaped his lover and his Midwestern hometown, he cannot forget the quiet tragedy that has defined his life: when his mother, Dolores, abandoned him without a word at the age of 17. Aaron cannot come to any sense of true peace until he untangles the mystery of her disappearance.

As its book jacket states, *After the Parade* acts as a "glorious new anthem for the outsider." I was kind of an awkward kid growing up, and so was Aaron. He noticed details, asked probing questions, and always came across as more polite and mature than his age would suggest. Ostlund renders Aaron's golden heart so readers will cheer him on, without making him too perfect or a caricature. She also includes a cynical dwarf, an obese baker, and a heretic aunt as secondary characters, showing how society's outsiders can find solidarity with each other.

After the Parade has an intense atmosphere of perpetual sadness. I drank a fudge milkshake while reading its last sections, and I had to look down to ensure that my milkshake had not turned into a smoothie made of my own internal tears. Nothing happens in this book, and yet everything happens. The plot moves super slow, but Ostlund's detached yet riveting narration of Aaron's internal landscape propelled the story forward.

This book delves into some deeper, darker themes I will avoid spoiling. Ostlund does a marvelous job of describing events from Aaron's childhood and their consequences by showing, not telling. *After the Parade*, in some ways, reminded me of Benjamin Alire Saenz's *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, but more bittersweet, more aged, and with a touch more nuance - even if Aaron strikes me as a

blend of Ari and Dante.

Overall, recommended to anyone interested in a story about losing everything to find yourself, told in quiet, observant prose. If you want fiction that will make you sit back and just soak in the world for awhile, this one is for you.

Rebecca says

“All the lonely people. Where do they all come from? / All the lonely people. Where do they all belong?”

Ostlund’s debut novel explores trauma and loneliness through the past and present of the protagonist, an ESL teacher who has just left his long-term partner, as well as the stories of those he meets. Although set over a six-month period, the novel is so full of flashbacks that it feels dense with the weight of the past. At times this can seem more like a set of short stories, only loosely connected through Aaron. Still, the overarching theme is strong and resonant: “after the parade,” after everything has changed irrevocably, you must keep going, pushing past the sadness to build a new life.

(Non-subscribers can read an excerpt of my full review at [BookBrowse](#).)

Donna says

This is one of those books that I can't find too much fault in, but I can't find myself feeling overly enthusiastic about it, either. I think this is because the main character, Aaron Englund, was undefined and unremarkable as an adult, even though he was well developed and interesting as a child whom the reader learns about in looking back sequences that comprise more than half the book.

Normally, it bothers me when books keep cutting away from the present to explore past events in the characters' lives, but not so with this book since I liked Aaron the child more than Aaron the adult. And I had hopes that the looking back sequences would shed light on what made Aaron the mostly passive person he was in the present. I only knew basic facts about him at the start, but not what made him tick. I knew that he was gay and forty-one years old, and in the middle of leaving his long time partner, Walter, a man fifteen years his senior. They had first met when Aaron was a teenager and later on, they lived together for two decades. Their relationship began when Walter took Aaron under his wing after Aaron's widowed mother had abandoned him suddenly when he had turned eighteen.

In the beginning, I didn't know why, after so many years together, Aaron was leaving Walter who didn't seem like a bad person. Aaron even seemed like the bad guy, himself, abandoning Walter, same as Aaron's mother had abandoned him. But before I could learn anything about their relationship, the author had Aaron on the road to his new life in San Francisco where he would live in a shabby studio apartment and teach adult ESL students. What made him give up steady companionship and a comfortable life with a man who loved him for this one? The answers were slow in coming since they were connected to Aaron's past, but the road to revelation was an interesting one.

These looking back sequences, which the author wove in seamlessly, were the best parts of this book, beginning when Aaron was five years old and dealing with a bully for a father. Aaron at five tried his best to

be agreeable and polite to avoid inflaming the rages his father would burst into without warning, but ironically, his acquiescent behavior only enraged his father more since he saw Aaron as weak and lacking in spirit. And his mother wasn't much help. She was busy coping with her husband and the emotional roller coaster of a life she was bound to with him. Then one day, Aaron's father died in a freak accident during a parade, and Aaron's life was thrust into even more uncertainty over the next ten years. Along the way, he met a handful of both strange and regular people who would shape him into who he was to become in the present. The characterizations of these people were very detailed and enjoyable to read about, and elicited sympathy from me unlike Aaron's mother who also shaped him, along with his late father.

So that was basically it. Over the course of this book, the mystery surrounding Aaron's childhood was solved. But because I didn't care much for him as an adult or even know him enough as one, the ending, where certain revelations and epiphanies occurred, fell flat with me. And since the book barely touched on his life with Walter, I still couldn't completely understand Aaron's decision to leave him or sympathize with whatever it cost him to do it. But I really enjoyed reading about Aaron as a child, with him navigating around the obstacles to his happiness and threats to his sense of security. This is where the writing really took off with the author portraying very believable stages in a child's life, the world seen with intelligence through his innocent eyes. It was enough to keep me turning the pages.

As a side note, I did have a problem with the author's portrayal of overweight people in this book. There were three minor female characters dealing with weight issues, and they were shown as either being a slob or as being an outcast, or as pathetic in a quest to lose weight. This didn't sit right with me, especially the character who practically celebrated her lack of manners while eating, blaming it on a characteristic of being overweight. Why the author wrote with such negativity concerning this subject was a strike against this otherwise inoffensive, though average book.

Elyse Walters says

Very cool author....Lori Ostlund is here in Berkeley this weekend! Choose 'anything' by her... novel, short story, essay .. listen to her speak. . it's all good!

As a child, Aaron Englund couldn't remember playing with other children. He had been bullied, punched, taunted, and bitten by other children.

He was sensitive, lonely, and rejected.

It was already a loss having his father die...(even though abusive), but his mother ran off"sneaking out without saying good-bye".

As a young adult, Aaron meets Walter, (15 years older than him). Three years after meeting, Walter brings Aaron home to live with him. During the first four years they lived together, they never had sex - not with each other - but both were gay.

It was the night of Aaron's college graduation, - when Aaron felt deeply grateful to Walter for all he had provided... his living expenses and college tuition, that he seduced Walter, (knowing that Walter had been secretly in love with him) .

They became 'a couple'.

After twenty years ...Aaron, in his early 40's wants to leave Walter, (from New Mexico), and begin a new life in San Francisco. Through Aaron's voice, the reader can see that Aaron may

have never really loved Walter - the way Walter did him.

Aaron wonders if he is like his mother whom he has not seen in twenty years...as he, too, is sneaking out in the middle of the night without saying good-bye.

Aaron 'not' saying good-bye to Walter ... played heavy in my thoughts throughout this novel.

Aaron explains reasons why - on paper-

but he is now an adult....a teacher...a man that has an interest in injustice. Aaron says many times in this story, that he wants to tell the truth.... But Aaron is very aware that he is afraid of anger, (not comfortable with anger at all because of his father), but he lived with Walter, whom he witnessed appropriate anger. He never had a reason to 'fear' Walter
I imagine Walter would hurt, and be angry that Aaron did not say goodbye to him after 20 years of living together.

I was aching for a long time during this novel...

So much loneliness, and pain with most of the characters. From the start it wasn't 'only'

Aaron I hurt for. I was actually hurting- 'as much' for Walter, and the minor

characters at the start of this storyJacob and Britta. Characters just didn't 'drop off'

for me easily as Aaron began his new life in San Francisco. I wanted to know what happened

to Jacob who got beat up which landed him in a coma, , ... and if Britta was safe with her boyfriend. I worried about 'everyone' in

this novel... (looking at the many sides, faces, and situations everyone was in).

If I looked into my own life at any point, too long,my tummy did somersaults. So, I took a few deep

breaths with this novel...needing to stop to contemplate ...(childhood & adulthood), and how we heal....and those people who make a big differences at turning points

in our development.

The author manage to keep me with one foot in this story

at all times...and one foot in my own life's history --- also at the same time. (I hate her)... Lol

Kidding. I'm still a little shaky...(this is a book, I'd walk off for an hour- not possible with crutches, at the moment), it certainly could make for a great book club discussion choice.

As an adult, we see Aaron apologetic and embarrassed to be in own skin...as we

take the journey with him in his present life in SF, while revisiting memories of his past as a way to attain a better understanding, and completion.....facing resentments, and regret.....

with hopes of feeling stronger to trust himself to love another person - and be able to problem-solve... instead of having to 'sneak away' from challenging situations.

Finding a path to Harmony one needs to discover, are endless!

Thank You to Scriber Publishing, Netgalley, and Lori Ostlund for the opportunity to read this.

Jennifer says

“After the Parade” delivers a powerful emotional punch from a gifted new voice. On the surface, the book is about Aaron Englund, a gay ESL teacher, who leaves his partner of 20 years and moves to San Francisco. Moving between flashbacks and present day, readers learn about Aaron’s past, as well as his new life in California.

Rather than being driven by plot, this book's genius is in the strength of its characters – those who appear throughout the entire novel, and those who appear for only a few scenes. Author Lori Ostlund has assembled an unforgettable cast of well-rounded, believable people – each with their own stories—seamlessly woven into the larger whole. The novel has a profound sadness to it that I hadn't expected as most of those we meet, including Aaron, have experienced tragedy, have been bullied, are outcasts, lonely, or somehow on the margins of society. I was surprised at how deeply it moved me. The book was excellent, yet at some points I was feeling the need to chase it with a beach read where the problems are trite and comical and everyone lives happily ever after.

I listened to the audio version of this book (borrowed from the library). The narrator does an excellent job. My only quibble with the audio is that there are several passages that are so beautifully written I would have liked to have had the text to highlight and save them.

4.5 stars.

karen says

As he stood waiting for the elevator car to tremble and plunge, he began to have what he thought were panic attacks, but these, too, he approached like a Midwesterner, which meant that while everything exploded inside him, from the outside he looked like a man stoically riding the elevator.

this is an amazingly beautiful novel, cataloging the entire spectrum of loneliness. ostlund is a master storyteller, and her characters and situations are touching and raw and honest. when you reduce the novel to its barest elements, it doesn't sound like anything special: aaron, a man in his early forties, leaves walter, his (significantly older) partner after more than twenty years and moves to san francisco where he takes stock of his life, confronts the haunting memories of his childhood in minnesota, and examines his relationship with his parents and walter as he determines what to do with the rest of his life. i mean, a midlife crisis novel? seriously? and yet it is so much more than that.

as the narrative moves back and forth in time, through aaron's memories and his starting over in san francisco, it highlights the fact that a person's coming of age can occur at any stage in life, and may actually happen several times. his father's death, his mother's disappearance, walter's rescuing and reshaping of him when he was still a teenager, the uncovering of family secrets and forgotten wounds, and all the similarly lonely people he meets across his life - every person leaves a mark, even if he isn't emotionally mature enough to realize it at the time.

aaron is someone very removed from his own emotional landscape. he watches old men every day at a diner, too intimidated to approach them, giving them names and listening to their stories, reminding himself: *Do not become comfortable with loneliness*, but unable to heed his own advice. on the night before he leaves walter, his concern is less for walter himself than the neighborhood cats he has named like the old diner men and has greeted every evening on his nightly walks, and also for an older neighbor woman who used his walks as opportunities to bring him stuck jars; a sweetly melancholy attempt at human contact, who would laugh at his jokes *the way that people who are very lonely laugh, paying you the only way they know how*.

this is what troubles him as he leaves his partner of twenty years:

when he let his mind stray to the future, to the next night and the one after, the thought of Mrs. Trujillo looking out the window with a stubborn jar of spaghetti sauce in her hands made his heart ache.

and there is so much ache in this novel as aaron leaves new mexico for san francisco where he teaches esl to adult students in a third-rate school and lives in the garage of a constantly-squabbling couple, alone in all the noise of someone else's problems. aaron maintains a relationship with walter's sister winnie, and even though he sometimes feels closer to her than he did to walter, he still misses walter and the influence he had in aaron's life, and this missing makes room for a resurgence of missing of his mother, who disappeared with a pastor one night when aaron was seventeen, after years of sorrow and sacrifice and illness and grief. and dwelling on *her* means dwelling on the death of his abusive policeman father who fell off a parade float in minnesota when aaron was five. so the novel spins into different sorrow-orbits, but it's never bleak - it's all pensive wistfulness and healing mourning, beautifully depicted.

it's very simply done, but in that "making it look effortless" way that is not at all effortless. it's a drawn-out character study that can get a bit episodic with all of the shinningly meaningful secondary characters, and it edges into "oh no, this could be whimsical" territory, but i dare you to not fall in love with clary, the tusked dwarf and his eyeless cat. i know. but trust me, it ain't as quirky as it sounds.

it's a very powerful debut that i don't want to tarnish any more with my dumb thoughts. sometimes you just have to put a book out there and quietly say "this is good" and let people come to it on their own.

so - this is good.

come to my blog!

Larry H says

I recently devoured Lori Ostlund's short story collection, *The Bigness of the World*, which I absolutely loved. (See my original review.) I so fell in love with her writing and her storytelling ability that I very quickly jumped into reading her debut novel, *After the Parade*. While I don't think I loved this book as much as her stories, I continue to be dazzled by Ostlund's talent and her ability to provoke so many different emotions with her writing.

Aaron Englund has been with his older partner Walter for 20 years, since Walter rescued him from a lonely existence in his small town of Morton, Minnesota. But while the two shared a strong bond, Aaron felt that Walter always controlled him, and never let him forget that he saved him. So one day, Aaron leaves their home in New Mexico and heads to San Francisco, where he hopes to start a new life and continue his career as an ESL teacher.

"Perhaps that was the nature of love: either a person was not in it enough to care, or was in it too deeply to make anything but mistakes."

Settling into a small garage apartment in San Francisco, Aaron begins to realize that a new life isn't all it's cracked up to be. While he enjoys helping his students maneuver their way through the idiosyncrasies of the English language, he spends most of his time alone, knowing he did the right thing in his relationship with Walter yet still missing him, and feeling ever more alone and isolated, but scared and unwilling to try and make new friends.

Through flashbacks we get a better understanding of what has shaped Aaron into the man he has become. His angry, abusive father was killed in a freak accident when he was five, and his mother vacillated between smothering and distant. He never felt he was the same as his fellow classmates, and he often was the object of ridicule and/or bullying. Throughout his childhood and young adulthood he encountered a number of people whose differences were either physical and emotional, yet he felt at home with them. And then, while he was in high school, his mother left home in the middle of the night with the town's priest, and she never connected with Aaron again.

After the Parade is a moving story about feeling isolated, feeling different, and how our relationships and personalities are shaped by the things that occur in our lives. I felt for Aaron so much as I learned more about him, his likes and dislikes, and his inability to feel comfortable letting his guard down. But at times the emotional distance at which his mother kept Aaron, and Aaron keeps the world, translated into an emotional distance for me as well, so at times I was frustrated by Aaron's inability to act, to say what was on his mind, to do something that might bring a change in his life, although I understood why.

This is a story that unfolds slowly (*very* slowly at times), and while the flashbacks are tremendously valuable for insight into his character, I would have enjoyed spending more time with Aaron in adulthood than in childhood. But while this isn't a book I necessarily *enjoyed*, it was a book that moved me, and Ostlund's talent is on full display here. It's definitely a book that has me thinking.

See all of my reviews at <http://itseithersadnessoreuphoria.blo....>
