



The Oregon Experiment

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East Coast transplants to small-town Oregon, Naomi and Scanlon Pratt are at the threshold of a new life. Scanlon has a position at the local university—teaching mass movements and domestic radicalism—and Naomi, a fragrance designer whose sense of smell has inexplicably vanished, is pregnant with their first child.

For Scanlon, all of this is ideal, from impending fatherhood to the chance for professional vindication. The Pacific Northwest provides ample opportunities for field research, and almost immediately he finds a subject in Clay, a troubled young anarchist who despises Scanlon's self-serving attempts at friendship but adores Naomi. He also becomes involved with a regional secessionist group and—despite his better judgment—with its leader, a sensuous free spirit called Sequoia.

Naomi, while far less enchanted with these radically different surroundings, discovers that Oregon has something to offer her as well: an extraordinary world of scents. Her acutely sensitive nose is somehow revived, though she certainly doesn't like everything she's smelling. And as the Pratts welcome their newborn son, their lives become so deeply entwined with Clay's that they must soon decide exactly where their loyalties lie, before the increasingly volatile activism that Scanlon has been dabbling in engulfs them all.

A contemporary civil war between desire and betrayal, rich in crisp, luxuriant detail, *The Oregon Experiment* explores a minefield of convictions and complications at once political, social, and intimately personal.

The Oregon Experiment Details

Date : Published June 14th 2011 by Knopf (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9780307594785

Author : Keith Scribner

Format : Hardcover 352 pages

Genre : Fiction

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Nettle says

Interestingly, this book manages to be both unpleasant and gripping. Admittedly, I picked it up because I was homesick for the Pacific Northwest, and the beautifully detailed descriptions of a crunchy central Oregon town were spot-on, and I read the story to the end because observing the slow-motion train wreck of the story was sickly fascinating. Yet...the story also annoyed me. As other reviewers have mentioned, none of the characters are particularly sympathetic, and most of them are downright unpleasant. The sensory descriptions of smells and tastes are so overwrought that they become revolting (which might have been the writer's intention). As an editor, I also found Writing 101-type errors that irritated me enormously: mentioning the same hallmark characteristics every time a particular character is mentioned, for instance, and endless repetition of some words and images. And at least in the Kindle edition, there were tense shifts that should have been caught in copyediting.

All in all, I found the story fascinating enough to hold on through it...but it also left me queasy, and I don't know that I'll look for more of this writer's work.

Sara Van Dyck says

Scanlon, a young professor with job problems, moves to "Douglas" (Eugene?) Oregon. with wife Naomi and baby, hoping to jump-start his career by studying a secession movement and anarchists in the NW. Scanlon and Naomi soon find themselves over their heads, dealing with destructive Clay, earth-mother Sequoia, plus academic and sexual jealousies.

Super depiction of Eugene: local places shifted around but the ambience kept intact. Scribner explores the reasoning of anti-establishment characters most of us (I assume) don't usually meet and gives us a bit of understanding of the folks who throw bricks through windows and plan attacks on the"corporate system" – always making sure that no people are harmed. Everyone in the book is trailing a lot of baggage. Comic, touching. A four-star for most readers, but a must-read for Oregon residents curious about the counter-culture.

Ellen says

I struggled to get through this book. About 1/3 through, I was depressed. A crumbling marriage, a job in jeopardy, anarchists running amok.... I questioned my ability to read a book without a guaranteed happy ending. So, for my own sanity (and for this not to be the third book in a row I stopped reading because I was 'sad') I persevered. I finished. I enjoyed the last third immensely. I'm glad I finished this book; the characters are now happily cavorting in my imagination, and all is well with the world. And also, everything smells differently now.

Liz Simmons says

This was weird. It is set in a fictional town in Oregon and (sort of) explores the Pacific Northwest anarchist subculture. It seems like a thinly disguised portrayal of Eugene, and it kind of annoyed me that he created a fake town name, because he includes so many real details everywhere else. You can tell that Scribner has been around this subculture of people, but it doesn't seem like he has a very nuanced understanding of them.

I also found the character of the professor's wife to be irritating, because he gave her the quirk of being "a professional nose" who lost her sense of smell. Too quirky of a character detail and didn't really fit in with the rest of the book.

Nonetheless, I was really interested while reading this book and enjoyed it for the most part. I think it had more potential than was actually realized, especially towards the end.

Renee Lytle says

You can read my full review here: <http://creativepersons.dudaone.com/re...>

Leslie says

This is a great novel that takes place in God's country -- western Oregon. One of the book's characters even corrects a person who mispronounces Oregon. And the descriptions of the flora and fauna of the Pacific Northwest are perfect.

Margaret Killjoy says

I enjoyed reading it, and it gave me plenty to think about.

I wrote a longer review of this analyzing the way the author represented (and misrepresented) anarchism here:

<http://birdsbeforethestorm.net/2014/0...>

Stacey says

Ended up skimming: mildly amusing, but not enough to engage me. Perhaps if I had tons of time and not much else to read it would be better, though. I can't pinpoint why I wasn't interested except to say that I was not in the mood to read about these characters and their oddities, and of course the entire extreme radical enviro folks, who are basically anal retentive conservatives in disguise, gain no sympathy from me at all. Perhaps my failure to enjoy this book was entirely based on that? I'd say, read Bernard Malamud's *A New Life* for a better academic novel about Corvallis, OR and Oregon State, and if you want to learn about the

Oregon environmental movement, no doubt the non fictional works that exist would provide more context and sympathy.

Doug Mckeever says

The book has some Franzen style elements which I really enjoyed. The characters could be frustrating at times but things resolved in the end with everyone finally giving into what fakers they were that I found it very satisfying. If only Naomi and Scanlon could in any way address their feelings or communicate properly it would have made me less angry but then I guess it wouldn't have been an interesting book.

Tim Lepczyk says

Anarchists, secessionists, and floundering academics! Oh my!

Keith Scribner's novel, *The Oregon Experiment*, follows Scanlon Pratt and his wife, Naomi Greenburg, as they move from New York City to Douglas, Oregon, where Pratt is ready to begin his first tenure-track position in the Political Science Department.

Immediately, tension fills the pages as Naomi tries to cope with the move. She's eight months pregnant, misses New York, and suffers from anosmia. For Naomi, anosmia is crippling, because she used to design scents and perfumes for her career. She has no explanation for losing her sense of smell and it's been gone since before she met Pratt. The loss becomes something the two explore in their relationship. Naomi teaches Pratt how to more fully experience scents and in return he describes the world to her. It smells like lavender pressed into the collar of a well-loved wool coat, he might say.

Due to this aspect of the characters, Scribner delights in describing the world through various scents and smells. It makes for an interesting perspective and adds rich details throughout the narrative.

Instead of soothing Naomi's anxieties, Pratt continually adds to them. Off to a rocky start in his department, he glosses over his career prospects, and seeks out the local secessionist group to study. But can he stay objective? Lured into the ranks by a seductive, earthy, young woman, Pratt soon finds trouble. Add young, naive anarchists into the mix and more than a marriage is likely to explode.

To be unfair to Keith Scribner, I kept thinking, what would this novel be like if T.C. Boyle wrote it? It has the trappings of a T.C. Boyle novel, but lacks the crisp writing and sharp characters. It's completely unfair and shouldn't shadow Scribner's work. Perhaps, part of the appeal is that it does remind me of a T.C. Boyle novel.

While the pacing dips toward the middle, the last 100 pages read quickly as events pick up. Relationships splinter, the FBI investigates, and a local anarchist, Clay, turns to domestic terrorism. It's in Clay that Scribner's compassion for his characters is fully expressed. At the end of the novel there are two versions of events. Events how they really occurred and events how Clay perceived them. Scribner didn't have to do this, but his decision captures Clay in a moment of glory and fulfillment. Scribner takes a character who may alienate some readers and finds a sweet spot in resolving the plot.

The Oregon Experiment examines love, passion, alienation, and community. Scribner creates a satisfying work that sheds light on an area of society, which is usually stereotyped in the media. Overall, the novel is engaging and extremely relevant as Occupy Wall Street protests swarm into business districts across the country.

Mary Montgomery says

Some people would really like this. I liked the part about Corvallis, although they named it something else. The author and chief protagonist live here and that was cool. It was also extremely well-written. But when it started going the direction of anarchy I had to quit. Not my thing and I ostrich.

Brad says

Overall, I liked this book pretty well. I read some of the reviews on Goodreads last night as I was almost finished. I can see the point behind point the negative and positive reviews. I tend to agree that the characters aren't particularly likable, but of course that needn't ruin a novel, and frankly I have a hard time imagining that the author would care whether you liked the characters or not. I was struggling to finish this book but another reviewer's remark that the book continued to open up more in her mind after finishing it encouraged me to make the final push. There are a lot of interesting elements going on in this book. I like how Scribner deals with the tension people experience living their lives according to their 'beliefs' (the importance of local economies, seceding from a corrupt government, etc.) and everyday reality. Worth reading for its high points.

Broadsnark says

I really wanted to like this book. It could have been a good book. I waited a day to write about it to give myself a chance to decide if I hated it only because of how it portrayed anarchists. But no.

How often do people write fiction about anarchists, environmentalists, academics, and secessionists in the Northwest? Too bad the author had zero interest in the actual beliefs held by the kind of people he was characterizing.

It could have been a meditation on life, government, authority, organizing, environmental destruction, and the kinds of compromises people make. Instead this is just one of those books that is about terrible people and not much else. Such a shame.

The punk anarchist never actually discusses anarchy. He just wants to blow shit up. But deep down he is just sad and guilty and turned to anarchy because he is damaged. The hippie was just running from her past and into a lot of woo woo. The NY Jewish princess is a feral mother driven by reproduction. Everybody has got mommy issues. Everybody is self absorbed. Nobody does the right thing. Ever.

Yawn.

And what is with the authors obsession with breastfeeding? Did he think he was picking up where *Grapes of Wrath* let off? Steinbeck should come back from the dead and slap him.

If you want to read a more generous review, also from an anarchist perspective, Margaret Killjoy wrote one here. I for one will tell you not to bother.

Krista says

This was an enjoyable (and quick) read - after taking a few months to make it through *The Brothers K*, I finished this in just a few days. The *Oregon Experiment* was a bizarre but somewhat interesting read. The main characters move to a small town in Oregon for an academic job (we're also just in the middle of an academic move, though not to anywhere that remote), and I did find them compelling and well developed. The way that Scribner wove the sense of smell throughout the story was one of the highlights.

The plot, however, didn't grip me nearly so much (I had trouble figuring out if it was supposed to be far-fetched/over the top or if it was intended to be taken seriously). Even the characters started to suffer under the weight of the plot, and ultimately the whole thing wrapped up much too quickly and neatly.

Still, I'd like to try another book of his (maybe the *GoodLife*).

Andy Miller says

A fun and thought provoking novel about a couple who move to a college town in Oregon from the East, he is a newly hired professor and she is pregnant and plans to focus on motherhood until she can resume her career. They soon meet members of the "secessionist" movement and a young anarchist who disdains Scanlon and his professorial research but who develops a crush on Naomi.

When I initially read the reviews and plot summaries I was worried that this book would be a caricature, either a way out book based in an idea where Oregon and Washington may actually secede or be a book that would make fun of Oregon/progressive personalities

It was neither. It was a nicely told story with complex characters, nice plot twists and painting shades of gray in the political arguments set forth in the story. I recommend this.
