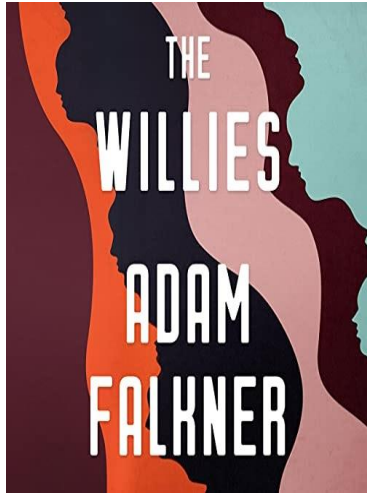


Adam Falkner, *The Willies* [Button Press, 2019]

Adam Falkner joins Warren Longmire as part of our Writers' Spotlight series on July 6.



Throughout Adam Falkner's *The Willies*, the poet seems to be looking for ways to lighten the heft of the weighty topics on shuffle through this collection. Self-effacing humor pops the balloon of sincerity every now and then, but frequently, the poems touch topics too heavy to shift. The poet's whiteness alongside his reckless consumption of Black culture as a younger person provide a persistent source of wry reflection. The culture of suburban whiteness, midwestern whiteness, hip-hop-loving whiteness is a matter of self-derision and regret. The poet effectively tracks the way *cool* often devolves into *cringe*, and our ideas about who we are change as our perspective broadens to see how we misunderstand our place in the world and recognize our ability to enact casual violence. This culture of whiteness and the silent politeness that it perpetuates allow an even more dangerous reality

when it comes to the unspoken truths of the poet and his family.

The title *The Willies* refers to the poet's father's response to "how gay people give him *the willies*, / rooted in 'Willie-boy' or sissy..." (3) and much of the collection navigates the space between father and son. That distance is established in several ways through the collection including the frustration and fear the poet expresses around the father's addictions. The poems "My Father Is a Mansion," "Fishing the Little Pigeon," "The Abandoned," and "Get Well Soon from Riverside Church" are perhaps most explicit in their consideration of the evolving relationship between father and son; however, the collection continually returns to ideas of family habits and expectations, the necessity of geographical distance between the poet and his family, and the ways we can love alongside worry, fear, or resentment.

Through the collection, several poems address the poet's experience with physical intimacy, from early fear and wariness to later celebration. Masculinity is depicted again and again: how a child expects masculinity to work, how a teen wants peers to see them, how an adult reconciles public and private identities. There are several poems that address sublimated or detoured sexual desires such as "Straight":

When I say he is a good-looking man,
I mean that objectively. As in anyone
who thinks otherwise might be so
homophobic that they themselves are
gay—and I am not gay, therefore,
I appreciate how others might be drawn
to certain features he holds....

...I could

say I think about his stubble against my neck
without our thinking this poem is about to

get gay as hell: that glorious scrape and push
of dueling jawlines. (33)

or “It’s Tricky So Stay With Me”:

I crushed on the girls who
dated the boys I crushed on which I understand seems
inefficient but really it did the job. (51)

or “Joey from Dawson’s Creek Was My Beard”:

...Joey wasn’t
real except that she taught me how simple it was to hide in a
look and a laugh... (60)

These poems consider the separation of self from persona. Here, the poet reflects perception and reality: how “simple it [is] to hide” from family, peers, and oneself. The self is layered and complex as a ball of yarn. In “Let’s Get One Thing Halfway Straight,” Falkner writes, “I have spent my entire life trying on costumes...” (5). These costumes conceal uncertainty around sexual or romantic desire, but the costumes also apply to one’s ability to “try on” aspects of a culture.

Poems such as “The Whitest Thing” and “Definition of Privilege” address the ability of white people to at once consume and ignore elements of Black culture:

...dip your toe in
and out. Run when you must, stay when you
choose. (“The Whitest Thing,” 29)

The poems interrogate the poet’s inconvenient position and offer no ease or absolution. “The work” of identifying privilege is not the work of undoing the systems that uphold it, and these poems among others seem to begin a potentially never-ending process of inward reflection and critique.

Music and very specific and important songs and albums reinforce the ideas of adolescent posturing, whiteness, and identity. With epigrams to the collection from Adrienne Rich and Ghostface Killah, we can see the importance of rap and popular culture in the collection. Poems with titles such as “The Year the Wu-Tang Drops” or “If You Don’t Know” locate the poet in specific moments in his life that music punctuates and makes visceral. These albums and lyrics, mostly from the 1990s, are significant markers in the poet’s personal history as well as in his understanding of self in society. In a 1928 essay, Zora Neale Hurston writes, “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” and many of Falkner’s poems seem to engage with the idea of that contrast from the perspective of whiteness: How do we as white people perpetuate that violence or “sharpness”? In “The Year The Blueprint Drops,” he writes:

...there is no manual on how to
give privilege back, how to
denounce a reach that stretches the
ocean....

...You only know what you do
not want and you are dangerous
beyond repair. (24)

In Adam Falkner's collection, *The Willies*, the poet positions himself as victim as well as perpetrator of a variety of violences. The reader may want to reassure the poet, to offer an assessment of *Not that bad* when considering some of the violence we have seen, heard of, or perpetuated ourselves, but Falkner avoids such comforts. This collection peels away cover after cover, exposing and exploring the poet's multifaceted truth, reconciling that truth to new costumes.