

Beartown

My wife won't enjoy hearing this, but I've fallen in love again. Not with another woman, but the novel Beartown (2017) by Fredrik Backman. Well, it might not be love as much as infatuation. Similar to the night I spent reading Mr. Penumbra's 24-Hour Bookstore by Robin Sloan. Or a bit stronger. Like the crush I developed one summer working through Lev Grossman's The Magicians, The Magician King, and The Magician's Land. I'm sure it's nowhere close to the full-blown love affair I've had for John Steinbeck, Richard Russo, and William Wharton these many years. But infatuation, crush, or affair, Fredrik Backman has written a darn good story worth reading.

"What's so good about this author," my wife is sure to ask, "that distracts you from the more important things in life? Like your children and your family, hmm?"

I find it helpful to discuss these pangs of love with my wife when they occur. She knows I tend to obsess over authors until I either read every book they have written or become bored along the way and drop them. Much like love itself I suppose. In Backman's case, I blew off date night with my wife so I could finish the last two chapters of Beartown. And when she returned home sardonically asking how my night went, I mentioned I wanted to start the next two books in Backman's series, The Winners and Us Against You, right away. She wasn't pleased.

"This guy," I whined, dropping my voice down to its most manly timbre, "has written something comforting and familiar that is compelling. And far more poignant than expected." (Apparently I sound like a douchebag critic when I talk about books). "I think reading him will make me a better person. Plus, I want to find out what happens next."

“Hmm, what happens next sounds more accurate.” (She knows me too well). “Well, you were nice enough to clean up the mess in the garage without being asked so I imagine you deserve a reward. I’ll give you the weekend while I take the girls to visit my folks. Read to your heart’s content but be back in the land of reality by the time we return. Got it, dear?”

“Great. Thanks, honey.”

Two days and a night without distraction was plenty. A veritable mini vacation where I envisioned wearing pajamas all day, ordering takeout pizza, drinking a few nice lagers, and spending hour upon hour of uninterrupted reading sitting in my best recliner in front of the fireplace. Sounds romantic no?

And so I wonder. Do you know Fredrik Backman? Have you read the Beartown series? Would you like to go on this romantic getaway with me?

When I originally discovered Beartown, I was browsing a used bookstore in Palo Alto, unfamiliar with who Backman, the author, was. I only glanced over at his book because the cover picture depicted a quaint snowy town resting at the base of a mountain range with a couple of boys playing ice hockey out front. An enticing image that reminded me of a 1999 hockey film, *Mystery, Alaska*, which I had greatly enjoyed and felt nostalgic about.

Even reading the inside dust jacket made Beartown sound like *Mystery, Alaska*. Like one of those nice, nostalgic, small-town, David vs. Goliath sports dramas where the underdog strives to overcome adversity in order to win. Comforting life lessons included.

“People say Beartown is finished,” the jacket admonishes, “A tiny community nestled deep in the forest, it is slowly losing ground to the ever-encroaching trees. But down by the lake stands an old ice rink, built generations ago by the workingmen who founded this town. And that ice rink is the reason people in Beartown believe tomorrow will be better than today.”

Beartown is a comforting book even when it shouldn’t be. The story being a twist on the traditional David versus Goliath story in which a hockey town, rather than a religious nation, is used to reflect “the human condition.” A sports team (and town) of residents that demonstrate

both the best and worst iterations of its people as allegory to understanding the relationship between who we are when we are part of a community as opposed to who we wish to be. A choice everyone in Beartown must make to deeply felt consequences. Even when those distinctive choices don't seem very important at the time.

Though Backman's prose is not particularly nuanced, his writing is heartfelt and direct. I was impressed more than once by the insights introducing certain chapters and teared up every time tragedy came along. I liked most of the characters, as I was supposed to, and cared what happened to each, even those I didn't. And as the story progressed, I found myself completely at its mercy wondering where it was all going to end.

Beartown turned out to be a page-turner with all the hallmarks of a well written story authored by a good, solid writer.

After reading Beartown, I became curious about who Backman, the author, was. I had not heard of him before nor had anyone in my writers group. A few friends from my reader's group mentioned a passing familiarity with one of his previous novels, but most weren't knowledgeable about his work. So I jumped into a little internet search, which honestly meant I just typed his name into the google search bar and hit return.

Fredrik Backman's Wikipedia page names him as a "Swedish author, blogger, and columnist" whose popularity increased "across the pond" after the publication of his 2012 debut novel, A Man called Ove, was translated into English, won the 2014 Book Browse Debut Novel Award, and thereafter spent 42 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. A nice introductory accolade for any writer, and financially beneficial for sure, but in all honesty, the New York Times bestseller book list is not all that hallowed. Nor are their lists very influential in more discerning circles. At least not in either my reader or writer's groups. My peers and I find the NY Times bestseller lists tend to curate books mostly for social popularity of political or commercial expediency and financial gain rather than any particular authorial excellence. Resulting in one too many "bestsellers" being touted as such when they are no better than pulp fiction designed to "sell today, be gone tomorrow."

In my internet deep dive, I also came across a 2012 New York Times interview Backman gave to fellow writer, Elizabeth Egan, in which he was quoted as saying, "I'm not that fond of being called an author because I think it's such a huge title to have; that's a title for my heroes. I'm trying to be a storyteller."

Well Mr. Backman, I would say you wrote a good story. So you are a storyteller. I certainly hope you become an author one day. Beartown shows promise.

Let's talk Beartown, which begins with a nifty little mystery.

"Late one evening toward the end of March, a teenager picked up a double-barreled shotgun, walked into the forest, put the gun to someone else's head, and pulled the trigger. This is the story of how we got there."

What follows is a fairly straight forward tale concerning teenagers and adults living in a remote small town (are there any other kind?) who must contend with the big issues life presents as questions: Is there a distinction between passion and obsession? How deep do friendships go? Can a person hold on to their integrity when faced with the pressure to succeed? What happens when we carry the hopes and dreams of others? Who has the right to determine our future? And existentially, why do we do what we do?

Beartown, in chapter 37, explains it this way.

"Sooner or later, almost every discussion about the way people behave toward one another ends up becoming an argument about "human nature." That's never been an easy thing for biology teachers to explain: on the one hand, our entire species survived because we stuck together and cooperated, but on the other hand we developed because the strongest individuals always thrived at the expense of the weak. So we always end up arguing about where the boundaries should be drawn. How selfish are we allowed to be? How much are we obliged to care about each other?"

A panacea of existence philosopher and author Robert Breault decried as, "Life being a process by which a few desperate longings morph into a thousand meaningless wants."

In Beartown, hockey is the central binding between the haves and the have nots, the grown and still growing, young and old, man and woman, father and mother, brother and sister, teammate and fan, friend or foe, and just about every version in between.

“It’s only a game,” chapter seven says, “Everyone who plays it gets told that from time to time. A lot of people try to tell themselves that it’s true. But it’s complete nonsense. No one in this town would have been the same if that game hadn’t existed.”

Beartown doesn’t have a great deal of diversity, but it does have hockey, and the lonely challenge behind wanting to belong. To be accepted by one’s family, friends, and neighbors for who we are as much as who we wish to be. Sadly the pressure to compromise, to get along to go along, wins out more often than not and tends to be a guilty habit everyone lives with in Beartown. Only, as in life, there are no “take backs.” Just the hockey.

“In Beartown silence always goes hand in hand with shame.”

That is all I am going to reveal. I don’t want to spoil the story or the surprising turns the book takes. You should just read Beartown and discover the story for yourselves.

I will say this. What makes the book compelling has more to do with Backman’s technique of narrating rather than entrenching the reader on the other side of the fourth wall. He certainly *tells* you a story, with insights into nearly every corner of what each character is doing, thinking, and involved with, including past and future events. But the reader also knows he or she is not really part of the story. Like returning to your hometown after having been away a while, having a few drinks with an old friend at the local watering hole and realizing you don’t have much in common anymore. The technique works but grows increasingly unsatisfying as you progress deeper and deeper into the story.

Fredrick Backman’s Beartown is an interesting place, but I never truly felt part of that world. Entertained by his hometown tales, but not inhabited. Which makes the fourth wall effect wear thin and keeps Backman, in my opinion, unable to progress from “storyteller” to “author.” The descendant effect, I am sure, of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer’s school of New Journalism

that has influenced the novel for more than fifty odd years and turned novels into “sounds true” serial installments for the Sunday paper.

Nonetheless, Fredrik Backman has written a good story he should be proud of. One worth reading. If you haven't, pick up a copy of *Beartown* and give it a try. You won't be disappointed.

For my part, I have three more days till the weekend and the next book in Backman's Beartown series waiting on my nightstand. I look forward to reading it.

Postscript: Eric is an amateur reader who has been reading since childhood. He is also a sometime book review critic. A hobby he picked up in his older years.