

Title: Tomato Red
Author: Daniel Woodrell
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A trash town, trash life, even a trash name. Sammy Barlach, a twenty-four-year-old ex-convict, finds yet another fresh start working at a dog food factory in West Table, Missouri. Life is grim, and his hopes for a future of anything beyond survival are non-existent. Out of circumstance, Sammy finds himself stumbling through his life in the Ozarks in the novel *Tomato Red* by Daniel Woodrell.

After a long day at work, Sammy ends up with a crowd of cranked up bums who work up an idea to rob a local mansion that is rumored to be empty for the weekend. In the midst of his home invasion, the drugs wear off and Sammy falls asleep in the crash. When he wakes, he is met by the brother-sister duo, Jamalee and Jason Merridew, fellow burglars that break into rich folk's houses to try on their nice clothes and "play pretend" in the owner's absence. The pair hire Sammy on as muscle for their new plan to make it big and find better days. Sammy moves into their run-down house and becomes close to their mother, Bev, a country woman and prostitute in Venus Holler. Their living situation can only be described as white trash but Jamalee is in search of a better life for herself. She hopes to find it by reading etiquette books and prostituting her brother off in a scheme of blackmail. But there's a hitch in their plan when it turns out Jason's sexual preferences don't match up with the blueprint. Sammy starts to settle into his life with the Merridews until the unexpected happens, and his 'keep it moving' attitude comes in handy.

Author Daniel Woodrell captures the southern midwestern dialect perfectly in his narration. The trailer park atmosphere encompasses both the heavy weight of just trying to get by and the sub-par living conditions. The run-down smell almost waft off the page. Yet, while the book captures the hopelessness that follows those born into unfortunate circumstances trapped in a small-town life, the plot was lacking and the ending unsatisfying. Woodrell took unexpected turns at times and the story seemed to lack direction. One could argue that this winding narrative mirrors the fortune of the narrator, Sammy Barlach, but the result is just too disorienting. Jamalee was a problematic character, at times, being much too eager to pimp out her brother but also presented as a "manic pixie dream girl." Jason and Bev Merridew were, arguably, the most interesting characters in the novel. Jason struggles with his sexuality in the face of a lack of acceptance in his community, while also being the foundation that Jamalee rests on. Unfortunately, he meets a mysterious ending that demands explanation. Bev is a quite unique mother figure, if one could even call her that, though it's refreshing how little she was criticized for it. She supports herself through prostitution, and has done so for a long time, but even when asked says she has no regrets about her life or her choices. It's a different perspective than would be expected from such a character, but it's enjoyable over the classic helpless woman trope. The ending seems to leave things just about right back where it started, not unlike the trajectory of Sammy Barlach's life.

Anyone with an interest in the dark sides of rural life would love this book, whose theme 'Country Noir' was coined by the author Daniel Woodrell. *Tomato Red* exposes the cycle of

poverty that has become a part of life in the Ozarks, though it often manages to be lighthearted and funny, thanks to its narrator. This reader found the book to be thought provoking and entertaining, if frustrating due to an abrupt conclusion.

Reviewed by Cara Walsh.