

Driftless

reviewed by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [June 30, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Driftless

David Rhodes
Milkweed

Something has spooked July Montgomery's cows. As he scans the edges of the hayfield looking for the source of their fear, he reminisces about a morning 20 years

earlier when he bought his farm in Words, Wisconsin. After wandering from state to state and job to job, he had hitched a ride in a pickup truck, politely refused the driver's offer of supper, then camped out at the edge of a field. When he awoke he decided that it was time to quit wandering and stay put:

He had gone as far as he could. His life had grown too thin and he was nearing the end of himself. He was living but didn't feel alive. He knew no one in the sense of understanding them from the inside—feeling the center of their life—and no one knew him.

He had come here, he knew then, as a last stand—to either become in some way connected to other people or to die. He could no longer live as a hungry ghost.

Words is a fictional but recognizable hamlet in the “driftless” southwest corner of Wisconsin, an area that was missed by the glaciers that long ago dropped the “drifts,” or deposits of rock, clay and sand, that characterize much of Wisconsin geology.

In the early 1990s, my family and I rented a cottage on a farm hidden in a valley of southwestern Wisconsin. I remember driving past ominous, winding walls of rock hung with icicles and seeing an Amish father and son leading a horse to a barn. I remember deserted small towns, a flock of wild turkeys scattered along a hillside, and silent nights that were pitch-black just outside our cottage and star-filled above. I understand why, in spite of the region's economic distress, author David Rhodes recently told Tom Ashbrook (in an interview for Wisconsin Public Radio) of his love for southwestern Wisconsin, calling it a “wonderful area.”

At first I was restless with David Rhodes's novel *Driftless*. As the large cast of seemingly unconnected characters appeared one by one (always a risky beginning), I couldn't find a main character. There's Jacob Helm, the reliable mechanic at Words Repair Shop who for six long years has been hiding his grief for his dead wife. There's Gram Shotwell, surely the most steady and durable farmer in the area, who turns out to have built a bomb in his barn in anticipation of the moment when he can no longer hold his farm, marriage and family together. His sister Gail Shotwell is pursuing a country-western music career by playing gigs in local bars after she gets off work at a plastics factory. She likes to work out the chords of a new song mornings on the back porch—in the nude.

Imagine the moment when the long-suffering Jacob rounds the corner of Gail's house to tell her about a broken lawnmower and finds her on the back porch. Later, once the shock has worn off and other events have begun to melt his emotional freeze, the widower calls his encounter with the lovely Gail "the first assault on his Great Sorrow."

As I laughed, I realized that I was caught up in a powerful undercurrent: as one character encountered another, no matter how mundane the meeting, the new figure added to an expanding community, making all of the characters richer, more credible and more interesting. Ordinary people were becoming unique people; a depressed remnant of a town was becoming a community of grieving, aspiring, eccentric human beings.

Of course, not all encounters in *Words* are in the repair shop or on someone's back porch. The usual meeting places of rural Wisconsin are the local church and the local bar. The *Words* congregation of the Friends of Jesus Church (a form of Quakerism called Evangelical Friends) is a painfully recognizable set of octogenarians who don't want the piano moved or the hymns changed. The food is rich and heavy, the basement is moldy, and outreach consists of a sign at a county-fair pie booth announcing "John 3:16" in bold letters.

On Friday nights at the bar down the road where Gail and her band perform, Gail passes time watching the locals and listing the dozens of temporary and odd jobs they do to make a living. "In some societies," Rhodes writes, the locals "might be called peasants, *fellaheen*, the rural poor, survivalists, . . . Bubbas, self-taught intellectuals, back-to-the-land socialists, right-wing gun nuts, rubes, and dumb-ordinary people—terms of derision that so accurately conveyed the horror their lifestyle instilled in the middle and upper classes." Rhodes writes with humor and with compassion about most of these characters but has little sympathy for the new arrivals, suburbanites who wouldn't be staying long at the bar because "the music was too loud, the food too fatty, the smoke-filled rooms too carcinogenic, and the supply of bottled water too limited."

An accumulation of everyday encounters is the means by which Rhodes creates portraits of his characters—of their public personas and their private realities. The result is a quiet masterpiece from a writer who's been silent for 30 years. In the 1970s, Rhodes was a star on the literary horizon. His novels *The Easter House* and *Rock Island Line* were called "brilliant" and "wildly imaginative"; novelist John

Gardner called him “one of the best eyes in recent fiction.” Then a motorcycle accident left him paralyzed, and he stopped writing.

“I basically lost voice,” he told Geeta Sharma-Jensen of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. “I never stopped writing, but I think the writing became too personal. In my writings I was dealing with problems I wasn’t able to psychologically universalize. I couldn’t make my story one story. I was too consumed myself.” Those silent 30 years are poured out into *Driftless*; its characters are the author’s neighbors and friends. His experience as a person dependent on another for many basic needs, for example, is articulated by Olivia, a wheelchair-bound woman who lives with her 66-year-old sister, Violet.

What was the impetus for writing a book after 30 years? Rhodes described a precipitating event in the interview for Wisconsin Public Radio. At a funeral for a good friend who had died in a farming accident, Rhodes met many people he didn’t know but who all felt equally deeply about the deceased. He realized that he hadn’t known as much about his deceased friend as he’d thought, and that to really know his friend, he’d have to know all of these people. Rhodes realized that our identity is not a constant, the same in one relationship as in another, but instead is a composite, with every individual we know holding a piece of it, and all of these pieces making up who we are.

Fascination with his friend’s network led Rhodes to patiently develop fictional characters in relationship—sometimes in spite of their efforts to reject or avoid relationships. The Reverend Winnie Smith, for instance, seems to be competently pastoring the Friends of Jesus Church, but for some reason she avoids presiding at funerals, she avoids an uncle who reminds her of her miserable childhood, and she tries to avoid the man who falls in love with her. One longtime church member assesses the pastor this way: “The young woman was highly sensitive and overly intelligent—not stable traits in a pastor. Her heart was too full to be completely trusted with the customs of the church.”

Winnie grows in the reader’s affection as she softens her idealistic fervor and moves into her own life and faith. In a moment of epiphany, caught up in a divine revelation, she finds that she has wandered into the middle of a Wisconsin stream. Once home, she decides that she must share her experience with someone, so she goes next door to tell Olivia, who is a well-read amateur theologian. Olivia listens and arrives at another assessment of the pastor’s situation: “There were many

reasons to be suspicious. . . . In this age of profiteering, all a person had to do was watch a half-hour of television to understand how life's most treasured moments could be ransomed to sell underwear."

Later it's Olivia who decides to take a risk and experience God more directly. Restless to leave the confines of her home and be out in the world, she withdraws her life savings (and her sister's) from the bank and calls a taxi to take her to Lake Delton Casino. "All her life she had waited for God to seek her out, heal her body, and give her a new life. But waiting for God's Grace to knock on her door hadn't worked, so now she was going after Grace. She would follow her theodyssey wherever it led." It doesn't lead where she hopes it will, and we learn much about the novel's characters as they respond to the ensuing catastrophe.

Questions that persist and plague each character are given a whiff of grace through these interpersonal encounters. As for the main character? This figure emerges from the reader's slow, earned familiarity with the entire community. In Rhodes's design, to know the main character you have to know all of the characters.

Driftless readers will know these characters well and will find themselves asking after Olivia, Winnie, Jacob and the others whenever they're in small-town America. They'll have to agree with Rhodes: *Words* is one of those "places in the universe where the rules of the living did not require feeding on each other—where wonder could be discovered without horror and learning the truth did not entail losing one's faith."