

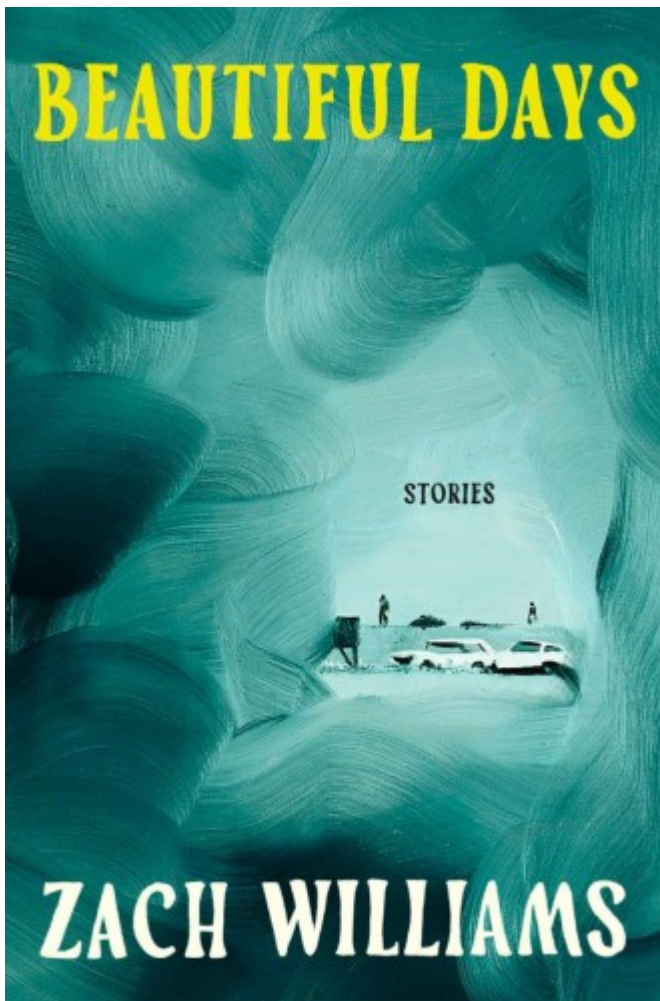
Piercing the veil

Zach Williams's stories of everyday life are propelled by strange turns of events, like a dad discovering his son's sixth toe in the bath.

by [Joshua B. Grace](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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## In Review



## Beautiful Days

Stories

By Zach Williams

Doubleday

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Literary fiction often revolves around rich, nuanced characters. Plots can be important, too, but literary fiction typically avoids plots that push characters around the page. The plots tend to stem from the specific circumstances of three-dimensional characters grappling with pressing dilemmas. So, if most great fiction revolves around rich characters, what happens if we take our protagonists and hollow them out a bit?

The answer may be that we get something different. Not necessarily better, but not necessarily worse either. We might get a kind of fiction that hits us in ways that stories with fully fleshed-out characters do not. Something, possibly, like the stories in *Beautiful Days*, the debut collection of short stories by Zach Williams.

It's not that *Beautiful Days* lacks characterization. However, the work that Williams does to shape his characters seems to function differently. The character details we get in *Beautiful Days* serve less to let us get to know the characters and more to get to know their situations.

I cannot claim to know how Williams approaches his stories, but I would hazard a guess. In November 2023, *The Bookseller* magazine announced that Hamish Hamilton had purchased *Beautiful Days*, and Williams touched on the genesis of his various stories. He said, "I wanted to write about characters desperately seeking beauty and meaning against a backdrop of modern American loneliness." In each of these stories, it is the search or the journey that matters, and the journeys can be startling and haunting.

Most of the stories in *Beautiful Days* are related by first-person narrators. In a classic third-person story, we might feel as though we're watching and getting to know the main characters. Sometimes, we may even get inside of their heads. At the same time, we remain separate from the protagonist and distant enough to observe how, as Heraclitus suggested, that protagonist's character decides his or her destiny. We watch, we observe, and we relate.

That is not how the stories in *Beautiful Days* operate. But nor do they function quite like a traditional first-person narrative. Reading a classic first-person story is like

listening to a friend. We learn how our friend navigated a strange, interesting, or memorable encounter, and our friend's personality remains firmly at the center of that story.

By contrast, the protagonists in *Beautiful Days* are overshadowed by the strange turns of events that compel them forward. Each of these stories features some element that transforms an ordinary day, effort, or relationship into something far stranger and far more unpredictable. In response, the characters become increasingly unmoored. Whatever they were before these turns, they become primarily vessels of curiosity and compulsion. They embody pursuits that Kafka might have appreciated, and they echo the ways that Kafka's narrators in *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial* struggle to impose themselves on the events that overtake them.

In short, there is a pattern to the stories of *Beautiful Days*. The protagonists encounter something that pierces some veil or illusion that had hitherto provided some measure of certainty or reassurance to their lives. In response, they lean into this newly inscrutable situation, seeking to find some new truth or understanding. As they delve deeper, the newly alien worlds and events surrounding them become larger and more important and, often, more menacing.

To put it another way, these stories center less on the characters and more on the situations, the real-world events in which Williams might have felt a pang of "modern American loneliness." In one story, a father washes his son in the bath. It's a normal moment, except that when he finds a sixth toe that has suddenly budded into existence on his son's foot, the toe's appearance wedges itself between father and son. Now, it is father and son—and the toe between them. Distance. In another story, a troubled couple moves across the country to San Francisco, hoping the move will help them repair their relationship, but when the husband finds a masked individual in his dead neighbor's living room, the tension of the moment leads down a spiral of strange decisions into hidden passageways that may or may not be more symbolic than physical. When his wife later asks him about what happened, it becomes clear how much his experience has separated them. By way of such imaginative and creative leaps, Williams reshapes real-world moments into fictional ones in which the protagonists' seeking takes priority.

The result is a collection of stories that feel immediate to the reader's experience in a way that many stories do not. Its hollowed-out protagonists provide very little

distance between the reader and the strange events they explore. While most writing teachers would tell you to make sure your characters feel robust and multidimensional, the thinness of the protagonists in *Beautiful Days* makes the stories feel more personal, more lived by the reader rather than the characters. And that is, perhaps, why so many of them are haunting.

The best of Williams's stories start with only the hint of something unusual, then delve quickly into worlds that feel deeply unsettled. They go deeper and deeper into these situations, revealing how little we know of our coworkers, the limits of our love for the people nearest us, the poison of nostalgia, and the lengths we must travel after tragedies scar us before we can reconnect with ourselves and our families. Then, before we feel we've seen these journeys neatly resolved, the stories end, ensuring that the questions and the disruptions remain with us.

The stories in *Beautiful Days* are not perfect. The longer ones begin to normalize the oddity of their situations. At least one of them telegraphs its twist. But they all aim to jar the reader into seeing things differently, into recognizing that our world is not so simple as it may seem.

Altogether, the stories in *Beautiful Days* remind us that literary fiction functions in more ways than one. Authors can toss out the expectations that serve as useless baggage. What is important is that the stories aim to accomplish something and that the writing supports those efforts. For the most part, *Beautiful Days* offers a successful blend of ambition and prose, and that is why this slim volume of stories hits harder and stays with me longer than most.