

The background features a complex network of white nodes and connecting lines, resembling a social or data network. The nodes are of varying sizes and are interconnected by thin white lines. The overall aesthetic is modern and digital, set against a gradient background that transitions from a deep purple at the top to a bright pink at the bottom. There are also some faint, larger geometric shapes in the background, possibly representing abstract concepts or data structures.

Real Life

Written by Brandon Taylor

Published by PDF Site

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Real Life

Real Life

By Brandon Taylor

Real Life Application

Named one of the most anticipated books of the year by Entertainment Weekly, Harper's Bazaar, BuzzFeed, and more.

Real Life

Real Life Quotes

A novel of startling intimacy, violence, and mercy among friends in a Midwestern university town, from an electric new voice.

Real Life Movies

Almost everything about Wallace is at odds with the Midwestern university town where he is working uneasily toward a biochem degree. An introverted young man from Alabama, black and queer, he has left behind his family without escaping the long shadows of his childhood. For reasons of self-preservation, Wallace has enforced a wary distance even within his own circle of friends—some dating each other, some dating women, some feigning straightness. But over the course of a late-summer weekend, a series of confrontations with colleagues, and an unexpected encounter with an ostensibly straight, white classmate, conspire to fracture his defenses while exposing long-hidden currents of hostility and desire within their community.

Real Life Situations

Real Life is a novel of profound and lacerating power, a story that asks if it's ever really possible to overcome our private wounds, and at what cost.

There is writing so exceptional, so intricately crafted that it demands reverence. The intimate prose of Brandon Taylor's exquisite debut novel Real Life offers exactly that kind of writing. He writes so powerfully about so many things--the perils of graduate education, blackness in a predominantly white setting, loneliness, desire, trauma, need. Wallace, the man at the center of this novel, is written with such nuance and tenderness and complexity. He is closed unto himself but wanting to open. There is writing so exceptional, so intricately crafted that it demands reverence. The intimate prose of Brandon Taylor's exquisite debut novel Real Life offers exactly that kind of writing. He writes so powerfully about so many things--the perils of graduate education, blackness in a predominantly white setting, loneliness, desire, trauma, need. Wallace, the man at the center of this novel, is written with such nuance and tenderness and complexity. He is closed unto himself but wanting to open to others even though the people around him may not be fully up to the task. And there is a sharp undercurrent of the erotic throughout. The way Taylor writes about bodies in the physical world is one of the highlights in a novel full of highlights. Truly, this is stunning work from a writer who wields his craft in absolutely unforgettable ways.

...more

Real Life Stories

â€” find this review & others on my blog â€”

This review would be a lot easier to write if Brandon Taylor werent so good.

Real Life was like a crush, an obsession. It seemed almost to beckon me like a half-curved hand, and when I finished reading it, I sat in the state of suspension that often comes over me at the end of a particularly good book, the sense of coming slowly back to awareness of the world outside my mind, and finding it echoing with a quiet that wasnt so much silence, but sound â€” find this review & others on my blog â€”

This review would be a lot easier to write if Brandon Taylor werenâ€™t so good.

â€œReal Lifeâ€• was like a crush, an obsession. It seemed almost to beckon me like a half-curved hand, and when I finished reading it, I sat in the state of suspension that often comes over me at the end of a particularly good book, the sense of coming slowly back to awareness of the world outside my mind, and finding it echoing with a quiet that wasnâ€™t so much silence, but sound pulled inside out.

On the surface, Brandon Taylorâ€™s debut novel, â€œReal Lifeâ€•, is the story of a gay black biochemistry student named Wallace from a small town in Alabama studying in an unnamed, predominantly white Midwestern university. But that barely touches the experience of reading this novel.

The first element that makes â€œReal Lifeâ€• so distinctive is the writing. Taylor has an unerring talent for acutely translating emotion into concrete sensation to slide readers into his characterâ€™s space, where they experience everything from the inside. Taylorâ€™s descriptions have shores, depths, a purpose and a shapeâ€”theyâ€™re not just formless and opaque, stretching out to every horizon. He writes as if he is closing his eyes and imagining he was opening other eyes that would look inward instead of out. But as fine and vivid as that deep soul-probe is, Taylor zooms outward just as deftly, marking everything, no detail too small to escape his noticeâ€”reflecting Wallaceâ€™s own tendency to see himself in every aspect of existence around him. This, I think, is the kind of prose that wants to be more than just read. It wants to be heard and tasted and felt. The kind that slides between your ribs, and opens you up like a reliquary full of old, forgotten memories.

Taylor peeks into Wallaceâ€™s state of troubled, quiet aloneness with both rigor and poetic license. A mind is a placeâ€”a landscape, a wilderness, a city, a worldâ€”that you could pace in endless, restless circuits and never find its edges. And Wallaceâ€™s is a world unto itself pulled tight and secretive, his thoughts sinking deep, undetected, like underground water. â€œYou are so determined to be unknowable,â€• one of his friendsâ€™ feeling like he could no more reach Wallace than he could fly into the airâ€”tells him at one point. But no matter how good the mind is at hiding things, it cannot erase

them. It can only conceal, and concealed things are not gone.

I saw myself in Wallace, in the weariness to his edges, like fraying cloth, that matched mine. It was as though Wallace's character evoked in me something that had the size and shape of a memory, but inversed or turned inside out. I recognized in his manner a familiar loneliness, a forlornness. That unbearable claustrophobia of the soul that comes through with powerful clarity in this novel—"no walls to throw an echo back, you clap and clap, but nothing answers back. It was hard to keep reading at times, as though with every page, I left something essential of me behind.

Taylor captures it all, with devastating honesty and vulnerability: Wallace's longing for a person, for a world, for a sense of self. The remembered violence of his past which he was in most agony to hide, but which was working its way into every crevice of his life, transmuting itself into an all-pervasive self-hatred and shame. The sadness in his anger, the guardedness of his grief over his recently dead father. A need growing inside his chest like a fruit splitting its rind: to shed his skin, snakelike, and fling himself into the seething unknown. Wallace's lust and his tremulous relationship with Miller which had a wild, manic quality to it—"something hectic and unhinged and a little perilous about it. Academia, and how it was twofold for Wallace—"it sidelined him (Wallace feels bottlenecked in the narrow halls of his predominantly white school, pressed together like tinned fish with people waiting for him to set foot in an unpropitious spot and prove their assumptions about him), but it also shepherded him. It was the invisible nautilus shell protecting him from the world, hope-laced and cruel, and "if he should lose it, he might not survive his life."

"Real Life" is also a razor-sharp exploration of how people can live shoulder to shoulder yet remain invisible to each other. There is an edge to Wallace, a hard collision with life, that his friends and colleagues—"most of whom are white"—hadn't known in their soft cocoons. Micro-aggressions are examined—"so familiar that my heart often felt like someone had touched a lit match to it"—and midway through "Real Life", Wallace makes a painful observation: "They are always laughing. This is it. That's how they get by. Silence and laughter, silence and laughter, switch and swing. The way one glides through this life without having to think about anything hard," and later, "There will always be this moment. There will always be good white people who love him and want the best for him but who are more afraid of other white people than of letting him down." His friends might listen, and nod, but the doors behind their eyes are closed, and their complacent silence proves to be as much a violation as a black eye, or a sprained wrist. "None of this is fair," writes Taylor, "None of this is good, [Wallace] knows. But he also knows that the point is not fairness. The point is not to be treated fairly or well. The point is to get your work done. The point is results." That is the tyranny of real life.

In those passages and so many others like it, we see the purifying rage of Taylor's prose. The novel offers itself up, bare and vulnerable, for its readers so they don't have to take on the daunting task of finding language to make sense of what they are feeling. We live in a culture that makes such little effort to understand the experiences of queer people of color, let alone help them understand their own. But "Real Life" is a scream that ensures visibility. It rings a bell deep inside, striking a

Real Life

resonant, vibrating note that makes you nod yes with recognition.

Sensual, defiant, and highly inward, this fiercely honest debut will linger long past the last page. A Must read.

â~† ko-fi â~... blog â~† twitter â~... tumblr â~† ...more

Contemplative and absorbing, *Real Life* reflects on what it means to live authentically. Unfolding over the course of a single summer weekend in a Midwestern college town, the story follows Wallace, a reticent biochem grad student, as he nears an existential breakdown. His father has recently passed, he finds academia stultifying, and, as a queer Black man in an overwhelmingly white space, he finds himself estranged from his friends and labmates, subject to constant microaggressions and overt harassment. Making things even more complicated is his budding romance with a standoffish white peer he formerly resented and thought straight. In mesmerizing prose Taylor fully renders Wallace's inner life, subtly capturing the ways he manages great stress and searches for a higher purpose in life. There's a lot in here that's only lightly sketched, from Wallace's relationship with his father to the personalities of his friends, but the writing's compelling and promising. ...more

Real Life Barbie

Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* is indisputably one of the best novels of our generation, and I say this because it is true. Do you know how wonderful it feels to be represented as a gay black man and by one of our own? Next to living, it is precisely the most euphoric feeling in the world, and so it is with immense joy that I could be one of this book's earliest champions. Because when it comes to realizing the anxieties and nuances of our humanity, Taylor has given life to a character gay literature. Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* is indisputably one of the best novels of our generation, and I say this because it is true. Do you know how wonderful it feels to be represented as a gay black man and by one of our own? Next to living, it is precisely the most euphoric feeling in the world, and so it is with immense joy that I could be one of this book's earliest champions. Because when it comes to realizing the anxieties and nuances of our humanity, Taylor has given life to a character gay literature has been hellbent on keeping in the shadows.

A story as painfully pure as its name, Taylor's forthcoming debut *Real Life* illustrates all the grueling battles of so many gay black men like Wallace, the nucleus of this story, who endure the lonesome journey for shelter and mercy under the false claim of acceptance. Wallace learns this lesson as a biochem graduate student in a Midwestern town when he's forced to face his predominantly white friend group and the peers with whom he encounters in academia, giving rise to a whole scourge of conflicts involving: racism, queerbaiting, tokenism, white mediocrity, fragility, and entitlement. These sufferings all feel a little less intolerable when a benevolent friend makes an unsuspectingly affectionate advance on Wallace, who timidly gives into whims and wants of his own. But friendships, like the embrace of such sudden love, can only be a forcefield for so long until the burden of race, class, and expectation has its way.

My entire life, as a gay black boy from the scraps of Michigan, I dreamt of the day I'd write a story, my story—this story. Brandon has beaten me to the punch, but what a glorious sight it is to see another one of us leap across the finish line. Much like the catharsis of Elio in front of that ungodly fireplace in *Call Me by Your Name* or how briskly my heart dissolved as Jack was slain in *Brokeback Mountain*, *Real Life* has the sort of cinematic charm to render any audience hot with tears.

Saeed Jones, Danez Smith, and now Brandon Taylor. My Charlie's Angels. My Destiny's Child. My beloveds. Thank you all for keeping us alive.

If you liked my review, feel free to follow me @parisperusing on Instagram. ...more

Longer review to come. Thanks so much to Riverhead Books for the review copy, clearly I adored this book and I'm so glad I got to read it. Longer review to come. Thanks so much to Riverhead Books for the review copy, clearly I adored this book and I'm so glad I got to read it. ...more

Real Life Synonym

I can't figure out if it's me or the books I've been reading, but I feel like I'm in a bit of a reading slump after a strong beginning in 2020. It took me forever to read *Real Life*. It's getting a fair bit of attention and is on several books to watch in 2020 lists, but I found it hard to keep focused on the narrative. Wallace is an African American graduate student in biochemistry at a mid western university. He comes from a brutal impoverished family in Alabama. He is gay. His father died recently. I can't figure out if it's me or the books I've been reading, but I feel like I'm in a bit of a reading slump after a strong beginning in 2020. It took me forever to read *Real Life*. It's getting a fair bit of attention and is on several books to watch in 2020 lists, but I found it hard to keep focused on the narrative. Wallace is an African American graduate student in biochemistry at a mid western university. He comes from a brutal impoverished family in Alabama. He is gay. His father died recently. The story focuses on a weekend in Wallace's life amongst his classmates when his emotional life seems to unravel. He feels out of place and misunderstood. But there are no better places on the horizon. The author paints an intimate portrait of alienation. It's well written and delves deep into contemporary interpersonal dynamics, but I didn't feel very engaged by the story or the characters. Perhaps it was too much of a micro-emotional exploration for my current tastes. Thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for an opportunity to read an advance copy. ...more

â~...â~...â~...â~...âœ° 4.25 stars

Is it into this culture that he is to emerge? Into the narrow, dark water of real life?

It had been awhile since I finished a book in one day or since I read a book that made me cry...but once I started *Real Life* I simply couldn't stop, even if what I was reading made me mad, then sad, then mad again, and then sad all over again.

This is one heart-wrenching novel. Reading it was an immersive and all-consuming experience. I felt both secondhand anxiety, embarrassment, and anger, â~...â~...â~...â~...âœ° 4.25 stars

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This is one heart-wrenching novel. Reading it was an immersive and all-consuming experience. I felt both secondhand anxiety, embarrassment, and anger, and the more I read the more frustrated I became by my own impotence...still, I kept on reading, desperate to catch a glimpse of hope or happiness...

“People can be unpredictable in their cruelty.”

Taylor's riveting debut novel chronicles a graduate student's turbulent weekend. At its heart, this is the Wallace's story. Wallace is gay, black, painfully aware of his almost debilitating anxiety and of what he perceives as his physical and internal flaws.

As one of the few black men in this unnamed Midwestern city, and the only black man in his course, Wallace knows that he is in a “different” position from his white friends. After a childhood disrupted by poverty and many traumatic experiences, he withdraws into studies, dedicating most of his waking hours to lab tests and projects. Yet, even if he works twice as hard as other students, many still imply “directly and non-” that he was accepted into this program only because of his skin colour.

“Perhaps friendship is really nothing but controlled cruelty. Maybe that's all they're doing, lacerating each other and expecting kindness back.”

Real Life has all the trappings of a campus novel. From its confined setting of a university city “in which we follow Wallace as he goes to a popular student hangout by the lake, to his uni's labs, to his or his friends' apartments” to its focus on the shifting alliances and power dynamics between a group of friends. Yet, Taylor's novel also subverts some of this genre's characteristic. The academic world is not as sheltering as one might first imagine. Questioning 'real life vs. student life' becomes a leitmotif in the characters' conversations. Taylor's novel offers a much more less idyllic and romantic vision of the academic world than most other campus novels. If anything we became aware of the way in which 'real life' problems make their way into a student's realm.

“Affection always feels this way for him, like an undue burden, like putting weight and expectation onto someone else. As if affection were a kind of cruelty too.”

From the very first pages we see Wallace's environment and “friends” through his alienated lenses. While most of his friends are queer “gay, bisexual, or an unspecified sexuality” they are white and from far more privileged backgrounds. At the beginning of the novel Wallace “gives in” and agrees to meet them by the lake, after having avoided them for a long period of time.

What unfolds is deeply uncomfortable to read. In spite of their laughter and smiles, these people do not strike as friends. Their banter is cutting, their off-handed comments have sharp edges, and they are all incredibly and irresolutely selfish. Taylor quickly establishes the toxic dynamics between these 'friends'. While they might not be directly aggressive or hostile, they repeatedly hurt, belittle, betray, and undermine one other.

The distance Wallace feels from them is overwhelming. Yet, even if he tries to be on the outskirts of their discussions, he finds himself having to deal with their racist or otherwise hurtful remarks. Worst still, he is confronted with his 'friends' cowardice when they feign that they do not say racist or demeaning things. If anything they usually imply that he is the one who is oversensitive.

Over this weekend we see time and again just how horribly solipsistic and cowardly Wallace's friends are. They mask their racism and elitism under a pretence of wokeness. Similarly, one of

Real Life

Wallace's fellow students, believes that as a feminist she can be openly homophobic and racist, throwing around words such as misogynistic without thought or consequence in order to masquerade her own bigotry.

Wallace's friends' racism is far more surreptitious. For the most part they pretend that race doesn't matter, and that is Wallace who makes a big deal out of nothing. Yet, when someone says something discriminatory out loud, they do nothing.

As he hangs out with his friends he finds himself noticing just how far from perfect they are. A perfect or happy life seems unattainable. Even moments of lightheartedness or contentment give way to arguments and disagreements within this group. Even if what plagues Wallace's mind is far more disturbing than what his friends' rather mundane worries (regarding their future careers, current relationship etc) he often chooses to comfort or simply listen to them, rather than pouring his own heart out. Wallace knows that they couldn't possibly understand his relationship to his family and past.

He misses, maybe, also, other things, the weight of unnamed feelings moving through him. And those feelings were transmuted into something cruel and mean.

There was an economy to it, even when you couldn't see it at first, a shadow calculation running underneath all their lives.

While he may not voice his troubles while he is hanging out with his 'friends', Wallace's mind is often occupied with his own past and future. Taylor does a terrific job in giving us an impression of Wallace's discordant psyche. Moments of dissociation make him further retread within himself, escaping his uncomfortable surroundings. Like Wallace we begin to see his surroundings as unpleasant and claustrophobic. At times the people around him blur together, blending into a sea of white faces, making him feel all the more isolated.

Wallace's own insecurities colour most of his thoughts, feelings, and actions. Even when I could not understand him or in his moments of selfishness, I found myself caring for him and deeply affected by his circumstances. What he experiences...is brutal. When his coping mechanism (work/studying) is threatened his mental health spirals out of control.

The halting and recursive dialogue is incredibly realistic. Even when discussing seemingly ordinary things there is an underlying tension. And there is almost a stop-start quality to the characters' conversations that struck me for its realism. The way in which their arguments spiral into awkward silences, the tentative words that follow more heated ones, the impact of tone and interpretation.

A sense of physicality, of eroticism, pervades Taylor's narrative. Characters are often compared to animals, close attention is paid to their bodies "from their skin to their limbs" and to the way they move and look by themselves and together as a group. This attentiveness towards the body emphasises Wallace's own insecurity about the way he looks. In one of his more brooding moments he finds himself questioning whether he wants to be or be with an attractive guy. His contemplations about same-sex attraction definitely resonated with me. Envy and desire are not mutually exclusive.

“This is perhaps why people get together in the first place. The sharing of time. The sharing of the responsibility of anchoring oneself in the world. Life is less terrible when you can just rest for a moment, put everything down and wait without having to worry about being washed away.”

Taylor often contrasts seemingly opposing feelings. For example, sensual moments are underpinned by a current of danger. Wallace seems to find both force and vulnerability erotic.

Taylor’s narrative repeatedly examines the tense boundaries between pleasure and pain, attraction and repulsion, tenderness and violence. Taylor projects Wallace’s anxiety, depression, and discomfort onto his narrative so that a feeling of unease underlines our reading experience.

“He had considered himself a Midwesterner at heart, that being in the South and being gay were incompatible, that no two parts of a person could be more incompatible. But standing there, among the boats, shyly waiting to discover the people to whom he felt he would belong, he sensed the foolishness in that.”

Taylor’s prose could be in turns thoughtful and jarring. There are disturbingly detailed descriptions about Wallace’s lab-work, unflinching forays into past traumas, and thrilling evocations of sexual desire.

A seemingly ordinary weekend shows us just how inescapable social hierarchies are. The secular world of academia does not entirely succeed in keeping the real world at bay. Depression, anxiety, dysphoria, the lingering effects of abuse all make their way into Wallace’s story. We read of his confusing desires, of his ‘friends’ hypocrisy, of his own appetite for self-destruction...Real Life is not an easy read. There were many horrible moments in which I wanted to jump into the narrative to shake Wallace’s friends. Wallace too, pained me. In spite of his observant nature, he remains detached. He picks up on his friends’ horrible behaviour but with one or two exceptions he does not oppose them. Yet, I could also see why he remained passive. Being in his position is exhausting.

“It is a life spent swimming against the gradient, struggling up the channel of other people’s cruelty. It grates him to consider this, the shutting away of the part of him that now throbs and writhes like a new organ that senses so keenly the limitations of his life.”

Even if I craved for a more reassuring ending I still think that this is an impressive debut novel one that strikingly renders what it feels to inhabit a black body in a white-dominated environment. Real Life tackles racism, privilege, cruelty, cultural and power dynamics, and the complexities of sexual desire head on. Wallace’s friends are aggravating if not downright despicable. Which is perhaps why when alongside Wallace we glimpse some kindness in them, it makes us all the more upset.

Reading Real Life made me uncomfortable, angry, sad. Lines like these, “He typically brings crackers or another form of fiber because his friends are all full of shit and need cleaning out from time to time”, even made me laugh out loud.

What I’m trying to say, or write is this: this is a brilliant novel, one you should definitely read (with some

Real Life

caution, of course).

Anyhow, I can't wait to read more by Taylor.

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Real Life Graphs

Taylor's debut novel is strong when it focuses on the subtle dynamics of social interactions, when it conveys what it means to live in a white world as a black, homosexual man. Wallace, the protagonist, grew up in Alabama and is now enrolled in a graduate program for biochemistry in the Midwest - the only black student in his year. He falls for his white friend Miller who presents as straight and/or isn't sure whether he is gay. They start a relationship on the low, but, much like Wallace's interactions with his other friends, it is again and again troubled by reactions and behaviors Wallace has to deal with because he is black, and by his inhibitions fuelled by experiences. One main focus is on the fact that the people who do not speak up, who do not take his side but tell themselves that they carry no responsibility are as much the problem as those who discriminate against Wallace.

The author himself is black, queer, from Alabama and studied science in the Midwest, so in a way, this novel discusses real experiences in a fictional format. While there is loud, obvious racism, it's the quieter kind that unfolds in everyday conversations that underlines what Wallace is up against, how deeply ingrained racism is in the structures he has to inhabit and in the heads of people he has to deal with - and how hard it is to react without becoming the person who ends up being blamed. Taylor makes his readers feel the desperation and claustrophobia that comes with it, and thus gives us a new rendition of the genre of the campus novel. Spanning over just a few pivotal days and interspersed with recollections of childhood trauma, the text packs a real emotional punch.

But please, dear authors: When you write a German into a novel, don't make them a chiffré and name them Klaus - it will be extremely hard to find a guy in the year and age group Taylor depicts who is actually named Klaus. It just seems like Taylor carelessly slapped a random name that appeared to be typically German on the character, which reveals a serious amount of cluelessness.

This is a book about the struggle for dignity and to find a place for oneself, and how these strifes are made even harder through the effects of trauma and systemic injustice. A fascinating read that requires close attention. ...more

This is one of the best books I've read in a while, spread out over a few days because I was worried I'd finish it too quickly. The author uses some of his own experiences as a gay science grad student who is also a person of color. The character Wallace questions the white apology, how much we have to bring in from our past, and how sure we have to be of our life direction. I feel like I'm not doing it justice, still wrapping my head around it, but definitely felt the intensity of this read.

Real Life

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And it's not just the story, it's the writing. Here are a few examples:

"Sympathy was a kind of ventriloquism."

The entire two pages about the past, something the narrator is telling someone else but you only really know that in the next section. And something I get the impression he wants to believe but has not experienced in reality.

"...When you go to another place you don't have to carry the past with you... The past doesn't need a future. It has no use for what comes next. The past is greedy, always swallowing you up, always taking... I can't live as long as my past does. It's one or the other."

Sorry and white apologies and guilt without it changing you, etc...

"Just because you say you're sorry, or you say that someone doesn't deserve something, does not erase the facts of what has or has not happened, or who has or has not acted. Wallace is tired."

And then a pretty amazing moment where he's on the other side of sorry, which I won't quote but is riveting.

Read it, read it, read it.

TW for sexual assault. ...more

Real Life Heroes

Book of the Year (that's all I've got for now)

The other day I was at my daughters swim lesson and observed a fellow parent wearing a sweatshirt that said ADULTING IS HARD in obnoxiously large, all-caps print. She spent most of her child's lesson on her phone and/or sipping her Starbucks coffee. When she rose from her seat to greet her child as class concluded, she appeared visibly put out; it seemed as though she were in midst of texting someone else, that retrieving her kid was some monumental disruption to this activity. I felt bad for her. The other day I was at my daughter's swim lesson and observed a fellow parent wearing a sweatshirt that said "ADULTING IS HARD" in obnoxiously large, all-caps print. She spent most of her child's lesson on her phone and/or sipping her Starbucks coffee. When she rose from her seat to greet her child as class concluded, she appeared visibly put out; it seemed as though she were in midst of texting someone else, that retrieving her kid was some monumental disruption to this activity. I felt bad for her.

Not because I found her disposition relatable or deserving of empathy, but more so the opposite: that she likely had no clue what "adulting" truly was, that her grasp of real life and all that comes with it was embarrassingly narrow-minded. And that she wasted money on such a stupid fucking sweatshirt.

I fully admit I'm projecting, that my observation is unfair (probably). Homegirl's life may very well be rife with unthinkable misfortunes, the sweatshirt an ironic gesture. But let's for the sake of this review assume that what I did observe amounts to be some of the more difficult situations this woman has to deal with on a regular basis. Hardly worthy of a sweatshirt lamenting the challenges of being a grown-up, don't ya think? Maybe you agree, maybe you don't. To each their own.

I'd be willing to bet Wallace, the central figure of Brandon Taylor's brilliant brilliant brilliant (yes, it's worthy of not one but THREE brilliants) debut, *Real Life*, would agree with me. Not to discount other people's problems, but if anyone should be wearing a shirt expressing the difficulties of real life, it would be him. Though I hardly doubt he'd be so keen on literally wearing his problems; it's difficult enough for Wallace to open up as is.

One could hardly blame him given the hand he'd been dealt. Born and raised in Alabama, Wallace is a reticent, gay, black man entering an intense master's program in biochemistry at an unnamed Midwestern college, the only African American to be accepted into this mostly-white curriculum. As *Real Life* opens, Taylor introduces Wallace having already assimilated with his fellow post-grads, yet it's clear he's still very much struggling with the notion that he's an outsider looking in, a charity case, an affirmative action poster boy.

It doesn't help Wallace often finds himself on the receiving end of racist barbs and prejudicial accusations from several of his lab-mates. Already insecure about his place within the program, these

Real Life

microaggressions are like paper cuts continually slicing into Wallace's id, exposing his wounds to fuel a bubbling rage. It's easy to question why Wallace rarely fights back, yet entirely understandable (better still, relatable) his choice not to. He's of the mindset his path is one of eggshells rather than hardened terrain. When one of his experiments is compromised "Wallace fears it's been sabotaged by a "gifted" yet wholly repugnant lab-mate who accuses him of misogyny" and his place within the program is questioned, you want to stand up and fight for Wallace despite knowing it would do little good. "I fucking hate it here," he laments. Tough to disagree.

Adding to Wallace's inner struggle is his relationship with his immediate group of friends. Having recently learned of his estranged father's death, Wallace chooses not to divulge this information until weeks after the fact and once he does, it's shared within the group seemingly within seconds, much to Wallace's dismay. What's more, Wallace is called "selfish" for not having shared the news of daddy's demise "an understandable choice given he and his father's own tumultuous relationship, which Taylor frequently eludes to before ultimately detailing in a singular go-for-broke, first-person chapter that's as harrowing as a murder scene. Wallace's tensions rise and he lashes out; secrets he'd become privy to are revealed during one of Real Life's most powerful moments, a dinner party gone awry. Wallace is teetering on the edge of an emotional and existential breakdown, and it appears as though he's willing to take others down with him.

Even, and perhaps most especially, Miller, another member of their group of friends with whom Wallace begins a sexual relationship. Having started off on the wrong foot, Miller "white, straight" becomes Wallace's most revered ally, if not a kindred spirit. They share stories, intimacies, privacies; they're revealing their true selves to one another in ways both passionate and harrowing. Theirs is a relationship founded on tenderness yet fueled by violence, by hurt, by trauma. It's complicated. It's disturbing. It's real. So very real.

And it's so very absorbing. Credit to Brandon Taylor, who through measured, contemplative prose expresses intimacy finer than any debut author "strike that, author in general" I've read in a loooooooooong time, if not ever. His own background as a gay, black man living in the South certainly plays a role in this, but so too does his unquestionable gift of which we've only just begun reaping the benefits.

To which I ask: what more do you have up your sleeve, Mr. Taylor? I, for one, cannot wait to find out. So long as said sleeve isn't part of an ADULTING IS HARD sweatshirt, of course. With Real Life, you pretty well established that. ...more