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God Bless America: Book Review

Almond, Steve. *God Bless America: Stories*. Wilmington, NC: Lookout, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2011.

The pacing and imagery in *God Bless America* show off Almond's excellent craftsmanship, but the most stunning triumph of the collection is the characters, whether found in a train car, an airport, or a casino. Almond encourages his readers to venture into these worlds and see people the way they really are. When Billy Clamm, the protagonist of the titular story, embarks on a doomed voyage across the Boston Harbor, we are invited to revel along with him in his aspirations, delusional or not. Billy, along with many other characters in the collection, makes grave errors in judgment that might elicit disdain or even disgust. Almond, though, is less interested in depicting his characters justly than he is mercifully, and he offers each of them much-needed forgiveness.

Such is the case in "Not Until You Say Yes," a story belonging to Sophie Didasheim, an airport employee at the age of sixty-seven. Almond's humor is at its best here: frank and observational, unflinching but never derisive. Almond demonstrates his narrative finesse, highlighting Sophie's perceptiveness as well as her prejudices. For instance, this observation: "The babies, at least, she liked. Cute. They hadn't been turned into goons and sluts yet." Sophie is hardened, certainly. She's racist. The narration does not gloss over her flaws, but it allows for her complexity. At the end of the story, Almond plays with chronology, placing the climax after the denouement. It is that moment, saved until the very end of the piece, which explains Sophie's bitterness and

makes the reader ache for her.

The characters in “Tamalpais” are treated with the same care. This story, told by Austin, recounts his experience as a waiter in an expensive resort restaurant. Here, at age sixteen, he encounters Charlotte, an older woman supposedly meeting someone for dinner. At a certain point it becomes clear that no one will be joining her, though she refuses to admit this. Austin has a unique perspective on Charlotte’s loneliness. In his words, “I didn’t quite understand what she was after, that she wanted not to be alone, that this desire was itself scarier than anything my young mind could have dredged up.” Charlotte’s characterization is heart-wrenching, and her erratic behavior makes readers—and Austin—uncomfortable. At the end of his shift, Austin thinks he can leave Charlotte and her loneliness, and become “for just a second... a beam of light: ecstatic, weightless, invulnerable.” This moment of temporary freedom makes us mourn for Charlotte, and for Austin, who has still to learn the power of “a single wrong turn.”

For Tommy Tedesco of “First Date Back,” the war has presented many such moments. The story depicts Tedesco’s homecoming, his struggle with PTSD, and his desperate attraction to a flight attendant. “He wanted the girl,” Almond writes. “He wanted to climb into her body and never come out.” This is a standout piece in the collection, an elegantly crafted story that speaks to the complicated issues surrounding veterans and violence. Tedesco’s thoughts fade in and out of reality in a devastating portrayal of war flashbacks. Almond does not offer Tedesco absolution, but the reader is compelled to understand his predicament.

In general, *God Bless America* insists that readers understand its characters. We don’t have to like them. We certainly don’t have to agree with them. But we come to empathize. As Benjamin Percy puts it, Almond “makes [us] care deeply about his characters, so many of them wrong in the head and right in the heart, down on their luck but clinging to the desperate hope that the next hand of cards will turn up flush.” For at least a moment, we have to allow them their desires, no matter how greedy or selfish or misguided. This insistence resonates throughout the entire collection, but it is expressed most simply in the last lines of “Hope Wood,” where the narrator says of his friend, “I was just trying to believe him. It’s what anyone would have done with him there weeping.”