

A Map of Tulsa

by Benjamin Lytal (2013)

Critics have called 'A Map of Tulsa' an updated version of 'Catcher in the Rye' for the Internet age. It is not that but it is quite a good love story, moving without stooping to melodrama, although probably not as moving as the author was aiming for.

Jim Praley is back in his hometown of Tulsa, Oklahoma for the summer after having finished his freshman year at an Ivy League university. He runs into an acquaintance from high school in a bar and soon finds himself at a party meeting Adrienne, the sexually adventurous daughter of a family of oil barons that own the city. Jim is a writer and Adrienne, who dropped out of high school, wants to be an artist or a singer. Jim is beyond strange at times, such as describing the purchasing of condoms at a pharmacy as an "embarrassment that was endemic to my heart." WTF? The story is set in the present day not the 1950s. What's wrong with getting them at a supermarket? Speaking of which, Jim's favourite store is 'Target' but he cannot take Adrienne into 'Target' because he "kept certain parts of myself back." A burning desire to shop at 'Target' strikes him as profound but struck me as silly and I like shopping in 'Target' too!

The first part of the book has Jim developing a relationship with Adrienne. The second part begins five years later when he returns to Tulsa and finds Adrienne's life drastically different while he is the same. The standard for coming of age novels is a life-changing decision, a moral crisis, a loss of innocence, a gaining of wisdom or some other step in the direction of maturity. Jim learns something about himself but not nearly enough to qualify; he is the same at the end of the book as he was at the beginning. He does, however, learn about the meaning of love.

The prose is too often pretentious. Benjamin Lytal is a skilful writer but he tries too hard; literary prose should be effortless and this is not. For instance, when referring to car exhaust on a highway, Jim says "I took in the fumes like sea air." I repeat, WTF?

Lytal also makes worthwhile observations about abandoning old friends and seeking out new ones as life moves on but he tells us nothing worthwhile about Tulsa. The setting could have been anywhere. Despite all that, 'A Map of Tulsa' has its moments.

Three stars

Robert Hitchins April 2013

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