



**Book of the day**

## **Memorial by Bryan Washington review – a masterclass in empathy**

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**P**ut yourself in Benson’s shoes. Your partner’s mother, whom you’ve never met, arrives from Japan, just as your partner is leaving to see his dying father. You’re left in an odd-couple situation with a woman who, over breakfast, says: “So, how long have you been sleeping with my son?” Your relationship with her son, Mike, is possibly disintegrating or settling into monotony or whatever it is heterosexuals also dread. And finally, your own family is so fractured that you can’t approach the pieces without hurting yourself.

This is how we enter Bryan Washington’s *Memorial*, a novel in three sections. It flies us from Houston to Osaka and back to Houston, transporting us from Benson’s head to Mike’s and back to Benson’s.

A writer in his 20s, Washington already shows poise with his subject matter and cool control over his formal options. What I really want to say is, he’s a *chill* writer. Characters haunt dating apps; they text; they snap photographs and send them to each

other, and Washington reproduces them on the page without fanfare or self-congratulation at how contemporary his novel is. His first book, *Lot*, a collection of short stories, won the 2020 Dylan Thomas prize and the Lambda award for gay fiction, among others. In that book Washington wrote with big love for Houston; here he adds an intimate knowledge of Japan, writing from places and positions that we haven't historically seen in literature.

OK. Now put yourself in Mike's situation. You've left your partner behind with your mother while you take up residence in Japan with your estranged father, a man who previously abandoned your family, and has cancer but continues running his bar as if nothing's wrong. You're in an interracial relationship with Benson, a black man. It's wilting. When you first met, he was a mystery and a challenge, but now he is understood. You're in a rut.

The seduction of the first person is irresistible: it mimics the real-life tendency to favour our own point of view. Because the novel begins with Benson, our loyalties and sympathies are trained on him. But when the novel shifts to Mike's perspective, our loyalties realign. In this little manoeuvre lies the novel's secret power. *Memorial* reveals our incredible openness to believe, excuse, or empathise with whoever we feel closest to at a given moment. Naturally, by the time we shift back to Benson's point of view in the novel's closing section, we do so a little reluctantly, knowing he's not entirely the person he makes himself out to be - a victimised fellow forced to live with a woman he doesn't know out of filial duty by proxy.

What is so impressive about Washington is his restraint. He knows how to temper and balance. He does not indulge character and voice - or other pampered aspects of the literary novel - at the expense of plot. He tugs his plot forward by braiding the past with the present, home with work, Houston with Osaka. Race, sexuality, grief, trauma and class are timely subjects and Washington handles them with seriousness but not reverence. He can be funny without clowning around for approval. Characters fight physically; they hurt each other in so many ways. Yet none of it goes reported to authorities. *Memorial* reads like the unreported lives of people getting by without the mediation of police, social workers or therapists. In some ways, these Americans are the true undocumented people of the country.

The book's short sections can feel staccato. Perhaps Washington mistrusts our attention span. When Ximena, Benson's colleague at the school childcare centre, gets the last word in these short episodes, she delivers them with a scene-stealing hunger: too much well-timed wisdom and wit, too much mic-dropping before the exit. At other

points, the dialogue flattens out into Cormac McCarthyish rhythms. OK. OK. OK? Yeah. OK. OK then. Yeah.

All in all, though, Washington's instincts lead in the right direction. He transforms revelations into cliffhangers, like Elena Ferrante. He writes layered sex scenes, like Garth Greenwell. He delights in describing intricate food prep, but without an impending Virginia Woolf dinner party. By the end of the novel, we want for Benson and Mike what we want for ourselves: protection from the battering of life, a little happiness, a little love.

The achievement of *Memorial* is not in its mainstreaming of gay sexuality but its accomplishment of something far simpler and foundational to the novel: what is it like to see the world from Benson's perspective? What is it like to see the world from Mike's? Only in shifting perspectives, in temporarily relinquishing our own, can we inhabit a relationship from two sides. After a year that has formalised the appropriate distance between humans, Washington offers that fundamental skill, so lacking in American politics - to attend to another person's subjectivity as if your life depended on theirs.

• *Ian Williams's Reproduction (Dialogue) won the Giller prize. Memorial by Bryan Washington is published by Atlantic (RRP £14.99). To order a copy go to [guardianbookshop.com](http://guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply.*

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