

A NEW PLAYGROUND

a review by Wendy Tilley

Susan Reinhardt. *The Beautiful Misfits*. Regal House Publishing, 2023.

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In *The Beautiful Misfits*, author Susan Reinhardt tackles a story that is close to home for her and for many Americans. Inspired by the author's family's experience with the opioid epidemic, the novel is a meditation on the cost of addiction, the fear of having loved ones ripped away, and the importance of family.

In a prologue titled "The Unraveling," news anchor Josette Nickels delivers an on-air, off-script, alcohol-motivated monologue, which amounts to "eighty-four seconds of spewing her business like a Baptist at altar call" (4). The improvisation costs Josette her job, her home, and her relationship with her drug-addicted son, Finley. Though details about the on-air "incident" are revealed slowly throughout the novel, the reader knows from the start that it was bad.

A year later, in chapter one, we find Josie and her young daughter Dottie relocated from their hometown in Atlanta, GA, to Asheville, NC. Hoping to put some distance between herself and her problems and newfound notoriety (the "incident" video, inevitably, going viral), Josie has taken a job at the La Belleza cosmetics counter at the local Brigman's department store. But distance isn't what it used to be, and despite moving "a good four hours and two states" (32) from her old home, Josie finds that people in her new town know all about her.

Josie's days – and emotional life – are often defined by her cell phone and the possibility of her old life finding a way back in. "Her nerves kicked up" whenever the phone rang: "there was always the chance the call was

related to Finley." We're told that at one point in the past, "collect calls from jails, hospitals, and even psych wards seemed the norm" (38).

And this is the emotional core of the novel: the phone and the constant accessibility it provides. With it, Josie attempts to reach out and respond to Finley from a distance, to walk the tightrope of helping but not enabling. At one point early in the novel, while Josie "sipped her hot tea and contemplated ordering a glass of white wine" (29), her son texted demanding money. She texted back, "then realized her mistake" (30). Her son had blocked her. Josie's ex-husband Frank often calls to accuse her of not supporting their son. While Josie's mother, Katherine, "screen[s] all [her] calls" (52), she also has the unfortunate habit of showing up unannounced. The phone, for Josie and her family, is a way to act out their dysfunction, to hurt or ignore each other, not communicate.

Reinhardt is a humorist, and Josie shares her creator's sharp wit and gift for bon mots. Josie's work at the cosmetics counter allows for lots of colorful minor characters to be introduced, and the narrator is prone to cutting quips about other women's appearances. But not all Reinhardt's attention is given to witty dialogue and snark. Josie is just as apt to note "the fine May afternoon buttering the main entrance [of the department store] in sunlight" (34) and wish she were out



somewhere with her daughter enjoying the afternoon.

Witty lines, well-sketched minor characters, and playful plot points keep the story moving and the mood varied. Josie lets us know at one point that her realtor mentioned such amenities as a "lap pool, state-of-the-art gym, and two defibrillators right on site" when selling Josie her new home. The "little tidbit her realtor left out" was that 34 Could Be Worse Court, the actual address of their new home, is in a retirement community called Sunset Villas. Injury, meet insult, but Josie notes that "at least she didn't live on DNR Drive" (12).

Within this same chapter, we also meet Ruby Necessary, Dottie's new babysitter, who tells Josie, "this is my real name courtesy of my fifth and possibly final husband and not something I concocted" (11). Major characters receive the same comedic treatment. Josie's ex-husband, for example, is described as "a former dentist-turned-sculptor who enjoyed bong hits, playing mind games, and Minecraft" (49).

The novel circles around a central question – what causes addiction? – and Reinhardt doesn't offer a simple solution. Many possible causes are considered – genetic predisposition, upbringing, accident, availability – but ultimately it becomes a personal story like all stories of addiction are ultimately personal in their details even as they might include common experiences. Josie tells us how her son got addicted, and the novel raises awareness about the opioid epidemic and advocates for harm reduction. Occasionally, the novel's desire to raise awareness of the dangers and prevalence of addiction in the opioid epidemic can supersede Josie's own story, but this often comes in the guise of Josie's own journalism.

The Beautiful Misfits is a good faith look at the opioid epidemic in contemporary American culture, about which Reinhardt is apparently genuinely and deeply concerned, and though she can't offer a solution, she does show us that something is wrong and does so with an entertaining story. ■