

'The Perp Walk' plumbs stories of working class Detroit in the '60s and '70s

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The raw flats of working-class suburban Detroit in the late 1960s and '70s: It's Jim Ray Daniels' beat. The poet and Carnegie Mellon University English professor came to Pittsburgh nearly four decades ago, but the place and time where he grew up remains the primary lens through which he views the world in his fiction.

"The Perp Walk," his sixth collection of short fiction, is a potent suite of interlocking stories. As in his 2014 collection "Eight Mile High," the stories range from the classically structured to the experimental. "Perp Walk" tracks a group of kids from high school into college — from the confusion and frustration of youth to the more complex sufferings of adulthood.

The central character is Earl, or EJ, who sometimes tells his own story in the first person, and sometimes has it told in third. In

“They Swim,” Earl employs “we” as well as “I” to outline the life prospects of he and his friends; the story is an extended, multivalent metaphor embracing everything from sex ed on up — because none of these kids can swim.

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About half the book’s 20 pieces are flash fiction or even short prose poems, typically limning the contours of hopelessness: “Comfort, one word for it. Rungs on the ladder: imaginary. Leak in the roof: real.”

And while there’s plenty of humor, most of it is hard-bitten. As Earl says in “Quality of Light,” “We didn’t get the big picture, but the little picture didn’t look so good, and was getting worse, so why not make fun of it, as if we had some control?”

Still, “Perp Walk” revolves mainly around sexual and romantic relationships. There’s a touch of James Joyce’s yearning “Araby” in “Timber,” about Earl’s experience as a kid smart enough to use the word “vicarious” correctly but unable to hang on to any of his vacation-campground crushes from one summer to the next.

Things get only bleaker. “Little Stevie Wonder” finds Earl and his high school classmate (and sometime sex partner) Rita at college. But even at a rural liberal arts school where people seem mostly to party and play at being artists, the characters are haunted by their rough pasts, sexual assaults and bad faith.

As Earl edges into adulthood, the stories become increasingly self-lacerating. In “Beating around the Bush,” a narrative whose keystone is his own passivity, Earl says, “I didn’t know what

“THE PERP WALK”

By Jim Ray Daniels
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‘unforgivable’ meant, or how the world shaved its fine distinctions and let them run down the drain so that when it looked in the mirror all appeared smooth, indisputable.”

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As the emotional stakes rise, the narrative structures become increasingly unconventional. “Theme for an Imaginary Wedding” finds Earl’s friend Jake marrying a pregnant Rita, with Earl the likely father. It cracks into a mosaic of short sections, each a prism on Earl’s moral decay, and a narrator — who might be Earl, but might not — who keeps changing his story. As elsewhere in a book where chronologies often fracture in the telling, Jim Daniels’ artful framework suggests a crazy sadness too large for a mere “story” to contain.

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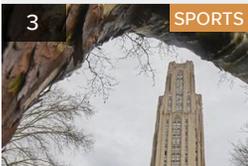
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- Novak Djokovic
- Roger Federer
- Rafael Nadal
- I don't have a favorite
- I don't watch tennis
- Other

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