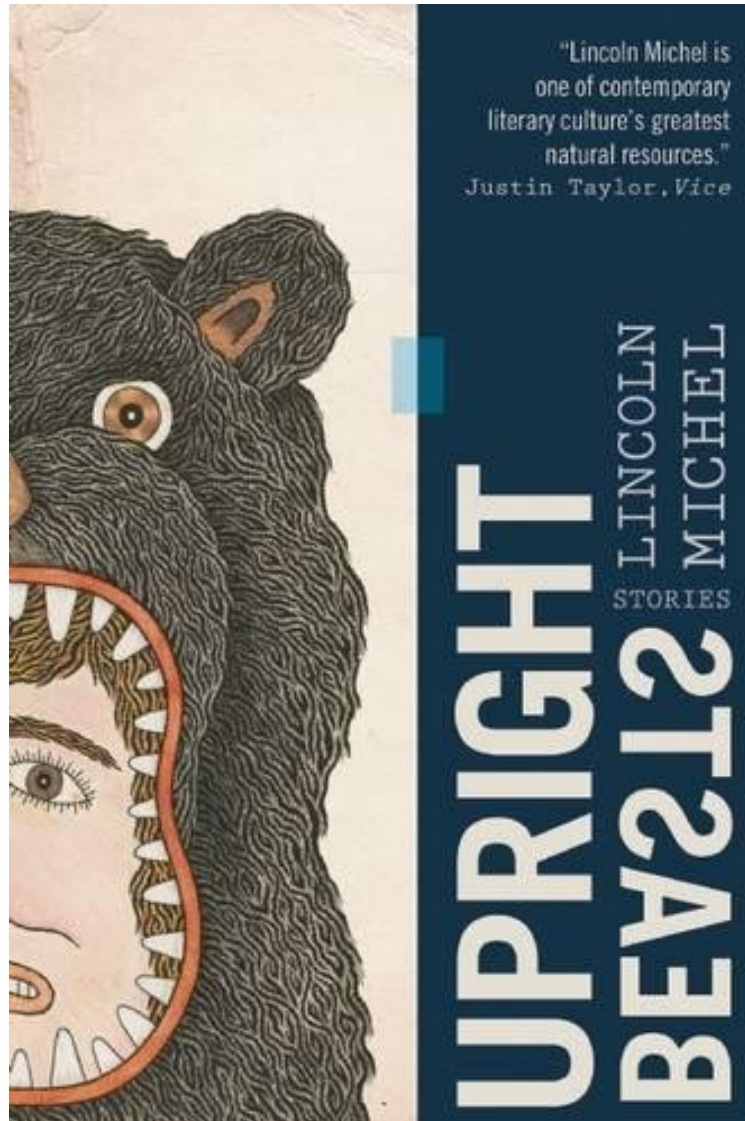


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Upright Beasts

Lincoln Michel

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Lincoln Michel : Upright Beasts before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Upright Beasts:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Upright Beasts Heralds a Bold, New Voice in LiteratureBy Matthew D DaughertyLincoln Michel seems determined to cut out his own corner of the literary world with his debut short story collection Upright Beasts, with “cut” being the operative word here. Michel’s stories are filled with hungry, ravenous animals, Lord of the Flies-level children, aspiring suiciders, violent teenagers, aliens that disgustingly alter

the human form, and shambling zombie babies that will gladly take a chunk off your shoulder if you're not careful. Almost every story deals with death or its inevitable approach, and certainly all ponder the line we walk every day between civilized human and letting our darker instincts take hold. The world of *Upright Beasts* is a strange and terrifying one, but the trip is altogether enjoyable, even if some stories clearly have more staying power than others. *Upright Beasts* is divided into four beastly sections, each with its own vaguely defined logic for the stories contained therein: there's "Upright Beasts," which deals with heightened and distorted views of our world taken to frightening extremes, such as the suburban man who turns his suburb into a militarized zone to maintain the peace in his neighborhood. Next is "North American Mammals," which deals with more "realistic" scenarios, but still with a cynical eye towards humanity that runs through the rest of the book. Then there's "Familiar Creatures," where Michel veers back into "genre" territory. These stories seem to share a common thread of displacement, with people attempting to come to terms with new surroundings and environments. Finally is the book's briefest section, "Megafauna." Only three stories are contained therein, but all deal with extraordinary outside forces: be they people or space aliens. However, the title of the book itself is entirely apt for every story that is in this collection. Every story, in some way or another, delves deeply into the horrific and callous ways that people can treat each other. For instance, while the highlight "Lawn Dad" may seem an almost fairy tale-like story of a father who slowly but surely becomes one with his lawn (in the most literal way possible), it's clear that it also is a commentary on the way parents can slowly fade out of the lives of their children. What's incredibly impressive is just how thematically cohesive this collection is. Throughout twenty-five stories, Michel takes aim at the human condition sharply and with an eye for our human failings. This may just be a long-winded way of saying that these stories work well as a collection, but as many short story collections seem sort of tossed together with whatever an author has laying around, this seems noteworthy. However, one could argue that this also makes this book something of an exhausting read. There's so much death and darkness that it almost threatens to swallow this collection whole, but Michel writes lightly enough and with such a sharp sense of wit that it's entirely possible to finish this collection in one fell swoop. While it's possible to recoil in disgust at the thought of a young boy being swallowed and living in the bellies of various animals throughout his lifetime, it's hard to still not laugh out loud at the sheer ridiculousness of it. Other stories don't have as light a touch, admittedly. When a young student is accidentally hanged as part of a school project, the weaker-willed reader might have the urge to put the book down, and that's fair. However, Michel should be commended for his bold, take-no-prisoners approach. As bold as his vision is, it should be noted that Michel doesn't always hit the high notes he intends to. In a book of twenty-five stories, some are bound to be more noteworthy than others, but it's to his credit that each and every one holds some sort of image or moment that still resonates after the book is closed. For instance, while "The Soldier" might seem a mere toss-off, the image of a mistreated dog howling angrily at the moon is still a powerful metaphor for a life that is seemingly suited for nothing but misery. Even stories that at first seem pointless or forgettable take on a life of their own when viewed from the lens of the book's larger framework. It's this dedication to his overall message that elevates even Michel's weaker stories in this collection, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Thankfully, however, Michel has far more hits than misses in this debut collection. One highlight is from the more literary section of this book, "North American Mammals," which echoes strongly of Raymond Carver's short story "So Much Water So Close to Home." In it, the narrator's husband finds a woman's dead body on their farm, and then what unfolds is something shocking, but largely understated. Michel takes what could be a "shock for shock's sake" story and injects it with enough genuine human emotion and sense of loss that it becomes beautiful in the process. When the ending comes, the narrator's actions seem outrageous, but wholly justified. However, the best story comes in the form of the second to last entry "Dark Air," an unconventional alien abduction tale. Not surprisingly, it deals with death, Cronenberg-esque body horror, possible infidelity, and a creepy hillbilly/hippie family. While it would be a disservice to any potential reader to disclose much else, suffice it to say that Michel handles the ensuing action with equal parts humor, surprising poignancy, and plenty of stomach churning images. What's perhaps most striking is just how uplifting the story turns out to be by its end, as we see the sun peeking through the clouds after the horror that preceded it. It seems that, for as dark as Michel's dawns can be, he still carries some hope for humanity. But then the last story ends on a depressing downbeat, so maybe Michel just wanted to bring us up to push us back down. Whether you view *Upright Beasts* as an unforgivingly dark and cynical look at human nature or a dark but optimistic take on our baser urges will color how the collection as a whole is viewed. Whatever interpretation is chosen, one thing is clear: *Upright Beasts* heralds a fresh, uncompromising voice in literature.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. These stories stay with you
By Virginia Reader
Lincoln
Michel's stories are truly strange beasts. Many have the surreal quality of a bizarre dream, but unlike a dream that soon dissipates from our consciousness when we wake, these stories stay with you- keep you pondering, thinking and wondering. Michel has a unique style and witty sense of humor that left me wanting more.
0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Not the next Kafka, but that's no problem
By Jakob Bellamy
I read one story on vice and thought Michel to be a legacy of sorts to Kafka—a role I'd love to see filled, yet unfortunately haven't yet (maybe that's the nature of Kafka and a legacy shouldn't be?). Well Michel isn't the next Kafka, but he's damn good. The story "The Solider" is possibly the most concise as well as one of the most moving, short anti-war stories I've seen (such a label does it little justice, the

story is phenomenal even beyond its ambitious, if somewhat tired, subject matter).

Praise for Lincoln Michel: "Lincoln Michel is one of contemporary literary culture's greatest natural resources."—Justin Taylor, *Vice* Time passes unexpectedly or, perhaps, inexactly at the school. It's hard to remember what semester we are supposed to be in. Several of the clocks still operate, but they don't show the same time. The red bells, affixed in every room, erupt several times each day, yet the intervals between the disruptions wax and wane with an unknown algorithm. The windows are obscured by construction paper murals. Consequently, the sun rises and falls in complete ignorance of those of us attending the school. Many of us participated in the decorations in some lost point of childhood. A few of us still have dried glue under our fingernails. In the room I sit in now, the windows are covered with a glitter and glue reenactment of the colonization of Roanoke by Sir Walter Raleigh. Outside of the window, who knows? Children go to school long after all the teachers have disappeared, a man manages an apartment complex of attempted suicides, and a couple navigates their relationship in the midst of a zombie attack. In these short stories, we are the upright beasts, doing battle with our darker, weirder impulses as the world collapses around us. Lincoln Michel's work has appeared in *BOMB*, *Oxford American*, *Tin House*, *the Believer*, *the Paris Review Daily*, and elsewhere. A founding editor of the literary magazine *Gigantic*, Michel also serves as an online editor for *Electric Literature*.

"The world presented in Michel's admirable debut collection is similar to our own, yet twisted just enough to feel strange. . . Michel frequently knocks his brief bursts of prose out of the park."—*Publishers Weekly* "Lincoln Michel is a master of where literary culture and the internet meet. His recent collection of funny, dark short stories, *Upright Beasts*, similarly blends worlds and bend rules."—*Brooklyn Magazine* "[*Upright Beasts* creates] a world twisted just enough to feel strange, and defies easy categorization."—*Publishers Weekly* "Michel's stories are often an uncanny combination of sinister and funny, tender and sad. Laura van den Berg calls them 'mighty surrealist wonders, mordantly funny and fiercely intelligent,' and many of them will soon be released together in Michel's first story collection *Upright Beasts*."—*The Millions* "Michel ably handles modes from lyrical to ironic, but he is most comfortable in a purposefully flat style that reads something like translated Kafka."—*New York Times Sunday Book* "Some of the stories are remarkable . . . A strong debut."—*Kirkus* "Sometimes hysterically funny and sometimes quietly disturbing, Michel's visions will appeal to readers looking for a few hours of purposefully unorthodox but refreshingly creative entertainment." —*Booklist*