

Deeren, R.S. (2023) *Enough to Lose*. Wayne State University Press.

Review by Jim Daniels

Enough to Lose, RS Deeren's debut collection of stories, offers a vivid snapshot of a time and place, a deep dive into life in Caro, a small, rural working-class town in the thumb of Michigan. From story to story, the book builds into a biography of place—physical place, economic place, emotional place—as Caro becomes the central character that unifies this collection. While zeroing in on one place, he offers a wide range of voices and characters, each with their own individual grit, that help complete the portrait of Caro.

The economic place for these stories is the great recession of 2008-2009. The hard times create an undercurrent of violence in this community, where Bucky's Bridge gets its name from someone who jumped off it to commit suicide, and a time-honored tradition is doing "The Run," a cross-county bar crawl. Drinking seems like the local sport, given the lack of other viable pursuits, and it fuels both of the major tragedies in this collection that hover over Caro like a haze that never clears—a car accident, violence in a bar, and, always, collateral damage.

Certain recurring places like Bucky's Bridge, the Cass River, the Pioneer Sugar Beet processing plant offer continuity to the larger narrative, but the bars are the true anchors here—anchoring the characters in place, or pulling them down with their weight. In "The Run," he writes that bars "...were everywhere, like screws in drywall..."

As we're transported into these places, during these years, our familiarity grows, and our understanding of the complexity of these interwoven lives intensifies. The characters, who call themselves "thumbodies," live on the margins, where the daily pressure to find a steady job and a place to live strips them to down to their primal, survival instincts, and we see the extremes they go to in order to protect what is theirs, whether that be tangible or intangible. The recession eliminated the narrow margin many of these characters were living on and dropped them into cracks from which they might never emerge. In "Enough to Lose," the narrator refers frankly to "the stained vinyl siding of my life." "The Mirror," the opening story, features a young couple who are in the process of fixing up their newly purchased home when a torrential flood arrives and literally carries it away. In another story, a homeowner gets arrested for breaking into his own house.

Deeren does not sentimentalize his world—nobody here has a heart of gold. And if they did, they'd probably pawn it to pay the rent. Pyramid schemes, house painting, mowing lawns of repossessed properties in order to help sell them, collecting deposit bottles and cans, selling chocolate bars door to door, scouring garage and estate sales, maxing out credit cards. Whatever it takes.

In "Her, Guts and All," deer hunting for food to get through winter involves fighting against those concerned only with counting points on antlers. The visceral description of tracking down a shot deer, dragging it to the river and gutting it, is both shocking and lyrical: "His footprints dotted the

snow behind him like brown exclamation points signaling his arrival.” When a freezer fails, the main characters, a widow and her son, resort to keeping deer meat outside, and the harsh winter briefly turns into an ally. In *Caro*, where they give an award for the best deer blind, the stakes are high, and, as is a recurring theme in the book, neighbors turning against neighbors. The residents fight the rich, and, with misdirected anger, they fight each other, since it’s hard to even find the rich.

Wind turbines also become a focus of local controversy—large visible structures that these characters can direct their anger towards when so many of the forces stacked against them are invisible and insidious. Like many small communities, intolerance for anything new or different gets a foothold here. There’s love here, but that love is tough and wary.

Stylistically, Deeren’s lyricism and imagery are first-rate, often counterpointing brutality or offering insight into it. The vividness of the sensory detail here is impressive—I can smell these places, and their whiffs of despair—and conjures up the soul of the Michigan Thumb, and places like it across the country. For example, in “Bridgework,” he writes, “. . . a lie is a hand tool you keep in the bottom of your toolbox just in case, like a star head screwdriver. Not good for most things but sure as shit handy when you need it.” Or, in “The Run,” “Owendale Draught was one of those places where the walls were more interesting than the people and that was saying a lot.”

While these characters are often sharp and educated in the ways of the world, they also sometimes make decisions not in their best interests due to misplaced loyalties or a drunken haze. In “About the Lies,” the narrator, Jamaica, a bartender, is smart enough to get the facts about wind turbines, but vulnerable enough to spend a night with a man whose name she doesn’t know, so he becomes “Maybe-Jeff-or-Cal.” She has a wicked sense of humor, even at her own expense: “We hugged the kind of goodbye hug you give a second cousin when they come to your high school graduation.” She’s also clear-eyed enough to see her own past: “By the time I would have been graduating with a bachelor’s degree, all I had was a divorce and the need to pay a full rent check every month.” A kiss from her golf coach when she’s in high school sends her life down a small-town path where everybody is a judge and subtlety and nuance get lost. The community metes out its own judgments, legal or otherwise.

Deeren, a Michigan native, writes with authority, heart, and a deep understanding of these people and places that goes far beyond offering up local landmarks. These characters know how to change their own wiper blades and gut their own deer, and so does he, and he recognizes the small moments where things come together or fall apart.

He knows this place, and his love for it—the tough love for it—comes through in every sentence. It’s like he’s holding a magnifying glass over it on a hot sunny day, heating it up just enough to keep the place from going up in flames. A fine debut and a bright future for this young writer.

Reviewer Bio

Jim Daniels’ latest book, *The Luck of the Fall*, fiction, was published in 2023. Recent poetry books include *The Human Engine at Dawn* and *Gun/Shy*. His chapbook, *Comment Card*, will be

published in 2024. A native of Detroit, he lives in Pittsburgh and teaches in the Alma College MFA program.