

Preview

Lost Again
A Novel in Stories
By
Michael O'Neill

Set between post-Woodstock 1969 and the eve of the American Bicentennial in December 1975, *Lost Again* is coming-of-age fiction about the interconnected lives of fervent college kids whose idealism splinters into confusion and disillusionment when they encounter the revolutionary promise of the 1960s in its quick decline. Denied a sure direction by the chaotic march of events, these radical wannabes find one another at Nick's, the barroom hangout and former speakeasy at the novel's center. Through interrelated stories with recurring characters, *Lost Again* exhumes the forgotten lives of these muddled visionaries, debunking counterculture myths with irony and humor, while creating sharp, funny portraits of gifted Catholic kids stumbling into adulthood, swapping their loss of faith for a cautious belief in their own resilience.

Nostalgic and acutely honest in turn, seventeen stories comprise the structure of *Lost Again*; their chronological arrangement supplies *Lost Again* with the narrative drive and character development of a novel. Thematically linked as well, the stories are framed by opening and closing first-person accounts of the protagonist, Robert Callahan, a burgeoning news reporter in love with history who shields himself from further disenchantment by escaping into his illusory role as an observer. Peter Rowley, a hard-drinking, pot-smoking, former high school football star, introduces Callahan to Nick's. Nick's attracts a variety of characters; to Callahan, however, Nick's itself becomes a character he grows to love. Through Nick's, Callahan learns to value the layers of loss binding him to his fellow patrons and connecting all of them with history.

The many characters Callahan evokes and recalls in *Lost Again* include: Alice Lapin, a tough pint-sized feminist secretly in love with Callahan; Ian Downing, a reserved student leader who heads an unsuccessful fight to overturn a tenure decision and becomes one of Callahan's heroes; Sister Jerry's Sister, a nun turned lounge singer who uses her brother Jerry and his Piper Cub to help a homeless radical but has her heart broken instead; handsome baseball star Bean Farrell who, enraged at his homosexuality, becomes a high-priced hustler; Red Rover O'Dwyer, a bartender at Nick's, who gives Kit and Tommy the child they have not been able to conceive by signing over his son, born out of wedlock, to them for adoption; and, Angela Brettini, a beautiful girl who fancies herself Lady Brett Ashley, convinces Callahan that all of them are a lost generation, and with whom Callahan falls hopelessly in love.

Despite shifts in point-of-view from story to story, *Lost Again* is Callahan's chronicle of growing up by seeing the world through the eyes of his friends from Nick's, often rendering individual stories in a style that imitates or parodies a particular "Lost Generation" writer—John Dos Passos in "The Big Catholic," for example, or Thomas Wolfe in "Orange, White, and Blue." Although this innovation adds stylistic layers to certain stories, it is not crucial for understanding *Lost Again*; nonetheless, this feature of the novel-in-stories acknowledges both Brett's lasting influence on Callahan and Callahan's gradual discovery, through history, of his own voice as a writer.