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*Guided Tours Through Wintergreen Hillocks: A Critique*

*Guided Tours Through Wintergreen Hillocks* follows the stories of an odd cast of characters gathered together in an apartment complex. The reader follows along with the experiences of an agoraphobic young woman, a failed fortune teller, a mysterious orb, a strange man, a comic relief character, a child journalist, a hitman, and a demon. The reading is structured into seven short stories with each story connected to the others in various ways.

I would characterize this as a work that does not care about whether or not its reader understands it. As I will expand on shortly, the conclusions and meanings of stories are often hidden behind layers of subtlety, forcing the reader to pay close attention in order to understand the story. However, unlike many writings of a similar nature, *Guided Tours Through Wintergreen Hillocks* does not reward the reader for paying close attention. Rather, the reader is exposed to tragic endings to character arcs that otherwise may have gone unnoticed. Take, for instance, the fortune teller's story. The reader is given an explanation of her powers and is made to understand that she has some sort of gambling addiction where she always tampers with people's futures. The gist of this explanation is that whenever the fortune teller sees someone's future and tells them the truth, their future changes. Soon after, in another character's chapter, the fortune teller seems to overcome her tendencies and finally refrains from sharing what she sees, thus leaving their future unchanged. As the customer departs, the fortune teller reminds them to take their umbrella, warning them that it would rain the next day. On the surface, this seems like a happy ending, but a reader who is paying close attention will soon realize that the

last line about the umbrella was placed there deliberately. In another story, a character comments on how hot the temperature is and hints that it hasn't rained in at least several days. The reader may put these clues together to realize that the fortune teller unwittingly told the customer an aspect of their future, thereby changing the future and resulting in a lack of rain. The stories are littered with small, subtle details that are essential to completing character arcs, but the reader is given little indication of how closely they need to be paying attention.

Perhaps the most frustrating example of this is the story of the hitman. After recalling vague details about his backstory, the hitman kills another character. It is unclear, however, who the hitman attacks. There are hints throughout several other stories that may help the reader realize that the hitman was at the fortune teller's apartment, but even then it is unclear if he killed the fortune teller or her mysterious orb. Additionally, the dying words of the character are written in Greek. If the reader is unwilling to take the time to search for the meaning of the phrase, the story's ending is unsatisfying and confusing. The translation of the phrase, "Be a better man than your father," is essential to understanding why the hitman collapsed in tears. In summary, the hitman's story requires the reader to gather context clues from other stories to understand the setting, and even then they will not grasp the meaning of the conclusion unless they translate the Greek words. This style of writing indicates that the author was not writing the stories with a general audience in mind. The author only seems interested in revealing the endings to exceptionally perceptive and invested readers.

Another interesting aspect of the stories involves the lack of character description. The reader is given very little information about each character. For instance, they know that Agatha is a young woman with agoraphobia, but they do not know what she looks like. They know that

Emre is a pale man with blonde hair and blue eyes, but they do not know his age. The inconsistent nature of the character descriptions calls into question why the author decided to write this way. Did the author only include details that were central to the stories? Was he leaving it up to the reader's imagination to fill in the other details? These questions lead to a more serious note. The author's lack of character descriptions does not equate to having diverse characters. The reader knows that there is a mixture of males and females in the story, but no attention is given to the race, ethnicity, or sexuality of most of the characters. What's more, the story seems to contain only the gender binary and never uses "they/them/their" pronouns unless referring to abstract third persons or objects. Whether or not all authors should make a more concerted effort to include people of all backgrounds is perhaps up for debate, but there is little doubt that some readers may feel left out of the author's world, which leads me to my next question.

Did the story take place in our world? The exact setting and characteristics of the story's world is quite unclear. On the one hand, there are many familiar elements. The characters live in an apartment complex, celebrate Halloween, stargaze, eat candy, smoke, and pray. There are clear references to roles that exist in our world, such as fortune tellers, journalists and gardeners. However, there are mystical elements that seem to be casually blended in as well. The fortune teller really does have powers, the strange man knows an unnerving amount about the world around him, and a demon exists in their midst. One possibility is that the stories are meant to be examples of magical realism, where supernatural forces are integrated into an otherwise "normal" world. However, as with many aspects of these stories, the exact nature of the world remains unclear.