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Reviewed by Doug Sheldon

Scott Gannis's freshman outing, *Very Fine People*, takes its title from Donald J. Trump's reference to white supremacists during the violence at Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. It introduces us to Jude Glick, a midwestern adult-orphan, working part time as both a comedian and a museum security guard and inching toward probable suicide. A former child frenemy, Stephen Scheisskopf, has wandered back into his life as the campaign associate of a Trumpian figure running for president. Schiesskopf exploits Glick's life story (poverty, addiction, sickness, premature death, crippling debt) to mold a far-right narrative drawing supporters to his candidate. Glick's self-loathing then escalates and soon progresses outward and imposes itself on the far-right supporters with catastrophic aptitude.

Very Fine People is more of a choleric essay cosplaying as a novel. It paves a road made from anger at the 2016 election but does not quite weave itself into solid fiction. The narrator, Jude, swirls like many did in the 2016–2020 haze of fascist resurgence and drags readers along with him while cloaked in a veneer of hard-boiled retorts posing as narration. But that might be the hidden fun of Gannis's debut: that so many people I know, including myself, identify with Jude's anger early in the thinly fictionalized Trumpian universe, until his inward thoughts trickle outward to force him on-the-lamb. For example, Jude breaks narrative saying things like "A few thousand people, active oppressors, or active oppressor adjacent...meditation appropriators, and the speciously thoughtful flannel wearers who want to bone them" (8) and while funny and observant, it doesn't add much to the books

attempted message of anti-fascism. Jude appears more whiney than righteous. This might be Gannis' point, to show murky nature of current political identity, yet Jude's narration often cannot meet this goal. Much of the narrative paragraphs read like Twitter threads, rant-ish, distracting, and, intentional or not, come off disjointed after a few chapters. When it comes to executing cohesion in a long-form narrative, *Very Fine People* falls a bit flat as the fury-layered pages lose steam building toward acts of violence consequential to Glick's journey.

Although, one thing is clear: Gannis did his homework. Borrowing the simmering despair of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Dan Chaon, and, most obviously, Joseph Heller, we get a narrator you cannot stop listening to. No matter how much the narrator drips with rage, some of it justified and some of it privileged, you root for him, even if you don't want to, as he attempts to delegitimize the dark forces swirling in pre-pandemic America. There are great twists and interesting characters that pilot Glick around in this ill-fated pilgrimage. Gannis exudes great rhetorical accuracy when assessing the copied-and-pasted speech of extremist actors, which stems from Schiesskopf's strategizing, and illustrates the antidemocratic nature of populism. There are even moments where Glick questions his own growing extremism after justifying the fame of a domestic terrorist like the Unabomber: "The fuck is wrong with me? With us?... could I ever forgive myself regardless" (p. 193). There is a sense of roundness to Glick. He is not just a flat extremist turned domestic terrorist or a cartoon drooling at death, but a complicated middle-American torn between extremism and decency who feels abandoned by his country and thirsts for revenge.

The novel concludes with a confessional author's note in which Gannis searches for sympathy in a senseless world. This feels like the whole novel distilled into four pages. He jabs lovingly at readers, reminding us all of the way we might have felt in late 2016, that we are connected by tissue and bone to those dark four years that followed. But the connectivity of this mini-revelation does not translate

into the text of the novel itself. In the end, *Very Fine People* falls into a similar trap in which many contemporary novels of the Trump era have found themselves: sacrificing story for message. This could be avoided, perhaps, if the self-loathing comedy of the novel took time for introspection rather than extrapolation. The sojourn for a great line, a pithy quip, or a darkly comedic paragraph has won out over narrative in *Very Fine People*, but damn if this anti-*Goldfinch* isn't a compelling examination of how fantasy-heroics can char the edges of a movement.

Doug Sheldon is a writer, scholar, and professor living in the Midwest. His work has appeared in Flyover Country Review, Midwestern Miscellany, Mid-America, and Teaching Hemingway and Gender.