

HARDSCRABLE BOOKS

A Book Sense 76 Pick

THE ROUND BARN

A NOVEL



With Reading Group Guide

Suzi Wizowaty



man would look like, and what kind of small house he would live in. What kind of house did Dean Allen inhabit? Or Charles Hopper? But now David could barely call up these men. It was only the imaginary characters who populated his small houses, imaginary characters who resembled closely the people he had loved—only his imagination and the sun licking his skin warm—that kept him from dying of loneliness.

In his senior year, David had fallen in love with Mr. Marcus. Mr. Marcus wore a jacket and tie when most teachers dressed much more casually, as if sloppiness were a way to reach disaffected teenagers. And Mr. Marcus didn't use the latest kid slang like a lot of teachers. Rather, he spoke carefully, made jokes half under his breath as if for himself alone, for the pure pleasure in expressing himself, not trying to please students at all—in fact, as if he didn't particularly care what students thought of him one way or another. When Mr. Marcus alluded to the Bacchae, or Ancient Rome, or Luther's revelation on the privy, or Bloomsbury, it seemed all the same to him whether students understood the reference or not. Some rolled their eyes at each other. David wrote down the references on his palm, and later looked them up. After Mr. Marcus mentioned Ovid, David discovered that his mother had *The Metamorphosis*, and he read the first fifty pages. (His mother insisted you couldn't tell about a book until you'd read the first fifty pages; it was how you kept an open mind.) It puzzled him, but he had no time to feel discouraged. He was busy looking up Schiller, and Dante, and Milton—who were these guys, anyway?—and doing his homework, weekly essays about Wallace Stevens and D. H. Lawrence and Langston Hughes. Mr. Marcus let them choose their author-subjects, and David, whose mother gave him Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Penelope Lively, Eudora Welty, “to round out your education,” chose men.

By Thanksgiving, David felt more at ease in Mr. Marcus's class, and wanted to please him more. By January, he had replaced his admiration for the teacher with a growing fondness. That was what he called it to himself, using a word his mother might have

used: *Oh yes, the Smiths are very fond of each other*, spoken with irony, as if it wouldn't last. His mother didn't have much faith in traditional marriage.

In his imagination he traced the wrinkles around Mr. Marcus's eyes with his fingers, and felt the firm warmth of Mr. Marcus's skin. He laughed quietly at more of Mr. Marcus's jokes and smiled to himself even when he didn't understand them: it delighted him to see Mr. Marcus enjoying class. It secretly pleased him when a classmate disappointed Mr. Marcus. He himself tried hard not to disappoint his teacher. He had never worked so hard. He thought about poetry a lot. He thought about Mr. Marcus. Mr. Marcus, though aloof in a strange way David couldn't account for, seemed at the same time to take pleasure in David's accomplishments. David thought Mr. Marcus liked him, but he wasn't sure.

That spring, his Aunt Didi, observing his new interest in poetry, had sent him a new biography of W. H. Auden. W. H. Auden had lived with Chester Kalman. As a lover. Loving each other openly. David wondered whether Mr. Marcus knew this, and what he would say. He dared not ask.

David took to visiting Mr. Marcus after school—something he had resisted until now, though he couldn't have said why. One warm spring day he arrived just as Mr. Marcus was locking the door.

“David! How nice to see you. I'm afraid I'm just going out. *Oh frabjous day, callough callay, he chortled in his joy*. I've got to walk to clear my head or I might start barking at the door.”

He had no objection to David's walking with him. They walked for an hour, into town and back again, talking about Greece and Turkey. David had seen a television show the night before about ancient Greece. Mr. Marcus had lived in Greece for two years. David had written a paper on Cycladic art once, inspired by the smooth, oval head with no eyes that sat on his mother's desk. Mr. Marcus spoke to him of Greek poets—Sappho, and Rita Bounci-Pappas.

“You must travel, David, whenever you can. *If you go among the trees, the children of the night will change your spirit*. Rudyard Kipling said that. You must have read *The Jungle Book* when you were

young. The Connecticut woods are beautiful, don't you think? Now he is scattered among a hundred cities and wholly given over to unfamiliar affections, to find his happiness in another kind of wood. That's Auden's elegy for Yeats. What do you think he meant?"

His teacher knew Auden, too. What did that mean? "That different people would love him when he was dead than when he was alive?" David almost whispered.

One night in March, David accompanied a friend to a basketball game at school. An important home game, a full gym, bleachers creaking and shaking, everyone yelling and stomping, everyone caring deeply about the outcome—except him. Or maybe not, he reflected. Maybe no one else did either. Maybe they were all pretending. Maybe it was the weather, as his mother often said. The moon. Maybe so, but he didn't think there was a moon, just an unusually warm spring night. Inside the packed gym, people were pressed too close together, the light was too bright, David could hardly breathe. A few minutes into the game, Mr. Marcus appeared in the doorway to the gym.

"I'm going to say hi to Mr. Marcus."

Impatiently David climbed over knees and slapped hands raised to him until he reached the aisle. Impatiently, but without a glance toward the door, as if he were going out for a soda or a smoke, afraid lest his teacher disappear at any minute, impatiently he made his way to the entrance. If he could talk to Mr. Marcus, the evening might be saved.

"Hey, Mr. Marcus. Do you know any poems about basketball?"

"No, but I'm sure there are some." Mr. Marcus smiled at David, uncrossed his arms and shoved his hands into his pockets. He leaned casually against the gym wall but his eyes darted about, following the players.

"I have known the inexorable boredom of basketball," David said, and he felt gratified by Mr. Marcus's smile. Did Mr. Marcus hold his gaze a second longer than necessary?

"Look at the challenge, the fight, the extraordinary energy of youth. The sweaty, banging bodies." Mr. Marcus didn't seem happy.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, not touching but nearer than

they were in class, nearer than in Mr. Marcus's office. It was noisy in the gym, and Mr. Marcus tilted his head slightly toward David when he spoke. "I had a close friend who loved basketball," Mr. Marcus said suddenly.

"What happened to him?"

"He died. Like so many others."

Soon Mr. Marcus left, to finish grading papers, he said with a wistful smile. He had only stopped in for a moment. David returned to the stands but could hardly sit still. He clapped and shouted with the crowd, felt the bleachers tremble beneath his feet, and it wasn't enough. At half time when the crowd spilled into the lobby, he excused himself. He had no plan but felt restless and itchy and needed to be outside. How sweet the air was, after the gym. How warm and soft on his skin. He spread his arms. He wanted something to happen. He jogged around the outside of the school, away from the gym and the theater and the cafeteria, toward the one-story, white clapboard classroom buildings. A soft light spilled from Mr. Marcus's open window onto the brick path and the flattened grass that surrounded it. A few minutes later, David knocked on Mr. Marcus's door.

"David! Game lost your interest again? Do come in."

David shut the door behind him. The small, book-lined office was half in shadows, lit only by the lamp on the desk, green glass that gave off a warm glow. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, no, I'm just finishing up. That is, it's too lovely a night to work. I've been sitting here thinking about life and death and other mundane things. *The rule of earth is attachment.*" He'd come from behind his desk to look out the window. He moved quickly, as always, but when he leaned on the windowsill, David observed the outline of the man's body in his slacks, sensed his quiet strength, and took courage.

"I have a present for you. Would you like to hear it?"

Mr. Marcus hesitated only a second. "Of course." He sat on the edge of his desk with his arms folded across his chest, as if trying to contain his own restless energy. David stood near the door, sensing the wall holding him up the same way it held up the ceiling. He waited. Finally Mr. Marcus looked at him. David recognized the

usual friendly encouragement, the seriousness, and yes, something else. He closed his eyes.

Oh sweet spontaneous
earth, how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers punched
and
poked

thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty .how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest
conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest
them only with

spring)

"Yes!" Mr. Marcus sprang from his desk and embraced David. His strong arms squeezed David's shoulders. His quick, light breath warmed David's neck. His firm chest, his taut thighs pressed against David's chest and thighs—hastily, only the lightest touch, lasting no more than a second. In two steps Mr. Marcus was at the window. He leaned outside. "Yes!" he shouted into the night. He turned quickly back to David, face flushed. "You are a delight, passing stranger. It's perfect." He grabbed a volume from the bookcase. "Here is another tribute to spring. Read Whitman tonight when you can't sleep."

David laughed along with his teacher.

The next Thursday David went to Mr. Marcus's office at his regular time. The wait had nearly killed him; he'd bitten his fingernails, a habit he thought he'd left behind years ago.

"Ah David, how nice to see you. Please come in."

Mr. Marcus shut the door behind David. He spoke slowly, unlike his usual, slightly rushing mumble. "David, I'm sorry that I embraced you the other night. It was inappropriate."

The words hung in the air between them. David couldn't breathe.

"Why?"

Mr. Marcus sighed. "Because I have a partner. Because you're a student. Because I'm gay and you'll get the wrong idea."

"What's the wrong idea?"

Mr. Marcus didn't answer at once. "*Honesty isn't so simple; a simple honesty is nothing but a lie.* Denise Levertov." He smiled slightly. "Sometimes it's better not—some things are best left unsaid."

What things, David wanted to know. But he didn't ask. He could barely think, let alone talk. He wanted this moment to go on forever.

"Can't we be friends?" he asked finally, in spite of himself.

Mr. Marcus started shuffling papers. "Shall I say yes, of course, we are friends, and let you be slowly disappointed when you find out that things aren't . . . as you want them to be? Or shall I tell you the truth and say no, and disappoint you now?"

Say yes and mean it, David thought. But he didn't say it. Mr. Marcus was leaving him his dignity. In response, David felt such a rush of longing, he could barely stand up. "I gotta go."

A week later, David came to Mr. Marcus's office for the last time. Mr. Marcus greeted him as he always had, with formal warmth.

David didn't sit. "I have a question for you, Mr. Marcus." He took a breath. "I'm gay, too. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I know."

They regarded each other in silence, each waiting for the other. David waited to see whether anything would come of the slight shift in power he felt at that moment, now that he had said aloud, and with pride, something he had never said before. Even with his Aunt Didi, it was simply understood. But nothing happened.

"Thanks for lending me the book. I liked it." He held it out to his teacher.

"It's a good thing to be gay," Mr. Marcus said carefully. "Do you want to talk about it?"

But David didn't.

He might love other men during his life—maybe—but surely he would never, ever feel the same acute longing he felt for Mr. Marcus.

making a cool place for his prey before grabbing it. The man was proud of his guns, but Tuesday only wanted the simplest, easiest rifle to shoot and take care of.

The man was also proud of his trophies that lined the back wall—deer and bear and elk. Tuesday didn't like the heads of dead animals.

"Seems to me when you're dead you'd want all your parts together," he said.

The man only laughed. "I got their butts stuffed on the other side of the wall." He moved slowly and easily, wrapping up the gun Tuesday didn't really want as if he knew the worst things about Tuesday and was just waiting to tell him. Tuesday was glad to get out the door.

"Ever worry you're going to kill someone?" he asked Sam on the way home, in an uncharacteristic burst of friendliness.

Sam didn't. He was real careful, he said. It wasn't what Tuesday meant.

All Tuesday's siblings were older. By the time he was ten, they had all left home, one by one, except his next brother, seven years older, who took him aside one night.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," he said. "One thing you got to do is empty the gun every Friday afternoon when you come home from school. You got to come home from school right away on Friday. Don't forget. That's your job now." He'd done it, too, every day, until he went to Maine. And after all that, his parents had been killed in a boating accident. Life was funny.

He'd told Mary this once—she was the only one. She'd said, "Give it up, Tuesday." And he had. But it didn't make him like guns.

He wasn't too popular as a hunting companion. He was too noisy. *Jeez, you got a heavy tread, man.* But he liked the nights, sitting around playing rummy and blackjack, drinking beer, strategizing as if for a world war, trying to outguess the enemy. Where the deer had been the year before, where they were likely to turn

up this year. Who was going to flush them out and who was going to wait to ambush them when they appeared. The deer were like partners in the game, only they didn't ask to play.

Tuesday could walk over the gravel paths in the museum in the dead of night with barely a sound. He felt at home there, as if it were his. *Wild mine.* Not as if he owned it exactly, but because he cared for it, and he had given himself to it . . . But no one owned the woods. He liked to go stomping through them in his own way, scattering squirrels and chipmunks that turned and scolded him furiously. There was enough room here for everyone, enough air for everyone to breathe, enough space to make a commotion without worrying about waking up an old drunk who might do who knew what.

He liked living alone and he liked walking in the woods alone. Which suited his new hunting buddies just fine.

On the last of four mornings, he'd awakened before dawn as usual, freezing in the dark cabin, the fire out in the fireplace. But it was his turn so he dragged himself out of his sleeping bag to start the fire and light the kerosene lamp. The other guys groaned and cursed under their breath as they woke up, the dark hushing their normally loud, blustery voices. Dawn was a humbling time for hunters, full of soft hope.

As prearranged, Tuesday clomped off alone. He felt friendly and waved back at the three scowling after him. When he came to a small meadow, ringed by low spruce, he kicked away the top frosty layer of leaves at the base of a large maple, removed his orange hunter's vest and sat on it. No one was going to shoot him here, and he was more concerned about a freezing, wet ass. He lay his gun across his lap like a good hunter. It was a chilly November morning; he could see his breath, and the woods were quiet, but not silent. There was only a light frost; the sun would be warm, and by mid-morning he would feel downright cheerful. He closed his eyes to listen better.

Tuesday had no intention of shooting anything. He planned simply to enjoy the morning. His life sucked right now—he'd just graduated from high school, he'd been promoted from

maintenance to security at the museum an hour away, but it was boring, and the girl he loved was going out with Jimmy Daly. The future looked pathetic. Worst of all, he didn't know what to do about it. But Jimmy Daly wasn't here, and Tuesday had taken his place, and it made him feel hopeful. Once in a blue moon—as Mary used to say—came a gift, an unexpected moment of happiness. *Don't blow it*, she would have said. And he wasn't going to.

He sat and listened to birds call here and there, and a rodent skitter over crunchy leaves. He dozed. And then he heard a shot. A few seconds later, into the meadow in front of him leaped a young buck. A spikehorn, a two-pointer, about eighty or ninety pounds. Steam rose off its back. There was another shot, and the buck fell.

Hidden in the brush, Tuesday Bailey sat stiff and alert as a deer himself. His heart beat crazily, as if it was his own mate just been killed. He gripped the gun. The ridges of the tree pressed into his back.

A man crashed through the woods on his left, into the meadow. He wore an orange vest over his denim jacket and an orange wool cap. He was panting hard. He stood over the buck, then knelt beside him. It was Jimmy Daly, the fuckhead, who was supposed to be minding his father's store.

Slowly, more slowly than he had ever moved in his life, as a seasoned hunter takes care not to frighten its prey, as if he had all the time in the world, Tuesday Bailey raised his gun. All the time in the world. Just Jimmy Daly and he, and the woods, and a dead buck barely thirty feet away. Everything else was still, and waiting. Everything else was knocked quiet by sudden death, death come and gone and death about to be, and Jimmy barely thirty feet away, clear now in the sights of the rifle lying lightly against Tuesday's shoulder. So lightly he could barely feel it. No weight at all in that rifle, it was a part of him now. No tension in the trigger.

It was the air that was heavy and still, pressing the voices of tiny birds back into their throats. The sound had gone out of the day, and the light. There was only Jimmy Daly bending over the dead buck. Everything else was holding its breath.

Tuesday gazed through the sights of his new rifle at Jimmy Daly's orange back. He removed the safety. His finger lay lightly on the trigger, the trigger that was an extension of his own finger.

A leaf fell soundlessly in the clearing. A drop of sweat rolled down Tuesday's side. He watched Jimmy Daly through the sights of his gun, and he had no thoughts but one, a mind free of thoughts for once, almost, in this no time, almost but for one: that he could see Jimmy Daly, and Jimmy couldn't see him.

Tuesday stashed the empty gun carefully where he had found it. It was early evening but dusk would not fall for several hours. He no longer wanted to clean the barn; it would wait. He had another idea.

In the barn, the two old kitchen chairs were stacked on top of each other next to the dead refrigerator. Once he had extricated them from the surrounding junk, he carried them over his head out onto the gravel driveway. They were scratched and covered with dust but they weren't broken. He would buy paints and he would paint a chair for Mary.

It was the only thing he could think of, besides killing her husband.

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After Jimmy left for the store on Monday morning, Mary made phone calls. She arranged for the Fishwives to bring meals for Jimmy once she could no longer cook; after all, she was still on the Life Passages committee. Anne Marie Desautels would do the scheduling. She arranged to have the visiting nurse come once a day after she couldn't get out of bed. She talked to the hospice people. She talked to the woman at the managed care place who knew her condition.

She knew she would have good days and bad days as her strength ebbed. And increasing pain. Already it hurt to sit and

FICTION

A Book Sense 76 Pick

In a deft and satisfying debut, Suzi Wizowaty skillfully weaves multiple story lines, told in a variety of voices, around the acquisition and relocation of a historic round barn by a museum in northern Vermont. With sympathy and insight, Wizowaty creates a range of characters—men and women, gay and straight—who wrestle with the unruly forces of love and art.

"[Wizowaty] creates characters who feel and sound real, all joined in the world through their humanity, like the beams attached to the center silo of a round barn. The author constructs a story as fascinating as the barn's architecture." —*Vermont Life*

"Wizowaty weaves together the lives of a pleasantly quirky group of folks." —*Boston Globe*

"Wizowaty's writing is all clean lines and spaces . . . The northeast corner of Vermont is a magical place and *The Round Barn* conveys this quality in its spare prose." —*The Gay & Lesbian Review*

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A Hardscrabble Book

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