



What Becomes Us

a novel by
Micah Perks

Author profile Micah Perks

In *What Becomes Us*, the new novel by Micah Perks, twin fetuses tell the story of their mild-mannered mother who abandons her controlling husband to start fresh in a small town in upstate New York. But her seemingly ideal neighbors are violently divided by the history Evie is teaching at the high school—the captivity and restoration of colonist Mary Rowlandson, a watershed conflict that leads our little narrators to ask big questions about love, survival, coveting the man next door and what exactly is a healthy appetite.

Q. *What Becomes Us* is mostly set in rural New York State. You live in Santa Cruz, California, which occupies a small portion of the book. What's your relationship with each region?

A. I grew up on a commune in the Adirondack wilderness of New York State, so I identify with the setting of *What Becomes Us*, a dead end dirt road with a lot of ethnically and racially diverse left leaning idealists on it, surrounded by more rural, conservative townspeople. Later, I got my BA and MFA at Cornell University, then taught there, so spent ten years around Ithaca, in Western New York, where the novel is mostly set. After Ithaca, I moved to Santa Cruz California to teach at University of California, Santa Cruz. So, like the main character Evie, I moved across country to start a new life. Now, I live with my husband, a Chilean professor of Latino and Latin American studies. We raised our four children here in Santa Cruz in cooperation with our ex's, their children and partners. Sometimes I think of us as one large, very diverse family, or maybe a mini-commune or sometimes a dead end road, depending on the day.



photo credit: Juan Poblete

Micah Perks is the author of a novel, *We Are Gathered Here*, a memoir, *Pagan Time*, and a long personal essay, *Alone In The Woods: Cheryl Strayed, My Daughter and Me*. Her short stories and essays have won five Pushcart Prize nominations and appeared in *Epoch*, *Zyzzyyva*, *Tin House*, *The Toast*, *OZY* and *The Rumpus*, amongst many journals and anthologies. Excerpts of *What Becomes Us* won a National Endowment for the Arts grant and *The New Guard* Machigonne 2014 Fiction Prize. She received her BA and MFA from Cornell University and now lives with her family in Santa Cruz where she co-directs the creative writing program at UCSC. More info and work at micahperks.com.

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Q. The book is full of characters engaged and moved by politics. How do you think about novels and politics? How do you balance politics with the demands of a good story?

A. Every novel is political because every novel is an argument about what's important, how the world is, what we should care about. However, I do think fiction can become boringly polemical if the characters and the story are one-dimensional. On the other hand, I'm always a sucker for social justice, fist in the air, stick it to the man kinds of stories. I think if by politics we mean deeply held beliefs about how we should live, and if those beliefs are severely tested, the result might be a great story.

“The numbers of Dead Girl books and movies really bothers me—shows that start with a dead, naked young girl in the woods. Captivity Narratives are about survivors”

Q. Much of the story revolves around early American colonist Mary Rowlandson. Why were you first drawn to her?

A. When I first read *The Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson*, it was like a slap in the face. I was used to thinking of Puritan writing as blah blah blah, convoluted and boring, but here suddenly I was confronted with the vivid, urgent voice of a woman speaking to me from three hundred and fifty years ago. I was fascinated by her hunger, by her unapologetic will to live. She will eat anything to keep from starving: raw liver, a horse hoof, a fetal fawn. The immediacy of her voice and her brutal story shocked me. She is also caught up in the U.S.'s original war on terror—King Philip's War between the colonists and the Algonquin people, which has so many parallels to the Iraq war and our own war on terror. Mary Rowlandson also wrote the original captivity narrative, a genre still vital today with books such as *Room* and *An Untamed State* or Tina Fey's series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*. The numbers of Dead Girl books and movies really bothers me—shows that start with a dead, naked young girl in the woods. Captivity Narratives are about survivors—they are narrated by incredibly strong women who figured out a way to stay alive under the most harrowing of circumstances. I think captivity narratives haunt me partly because I'm really afraid of being stuck, told what to do, captured. I'm existentially claustrophobic.

Q. What was the process of writing *What Becomes Us*?

A. It took over ten years to write. It was so challenging for me, figuring out the tricky double narration, the back and forth between Mary Rowlandson and Evie. I did a ton of research, too. Besides reading whatever I could find on Rowlandson's life and times, I visited her original home in Lancaster, and then Wethersfield, Connecticut where she moved after she was ransomed. I would completely rewrite the book one summer, then show it to my writing group, get advice, and completely revise it again the next summer. This went on and on. Finally I had to say, I'm done. I have to stop (although I'm still doing some last minute revisions before my July deadline).

Q. What are you working on now? What's your writing process like now?

A. Right now I'm enjoying writing personal essays and short stories, and I often publish them on the internet. It's been so exciting to be a part of the explosion of new writing on the web, particularly new venues and communities for women. I feel like I'm writing in the company of amazing feminists. However, I know myself, and soon enough, I will dive into some major project that will take years, research and passion. And in terms of my process I write when I can, not every day. I write towards a goal, like finish this piece in the next two weeks, rather than a set amount of time each day. I almost always write in the morning, facing the park opposite my house in Santa Cruz. In one of my recent stories, I gave the main character the same view of the park that I have: “the retirees practice tai chi in rough synchronicity, and the homeless people debate the park ranger, and the dogs collegially sniff each other's butts.”

Q. Is there something about you that most people don't know?

A. I write memoir, so there isn't much that people don't know, but here's the thing I've never written about—I'm secretly strong, like Incredible Hulk strong. Don't cross me.

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