



Yellow Stonefly: A Novel

By Tim Poland (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 2018) \$26.95, cloth.
ISBN 9780804012072, 272 pp.

From the very start of *Yellow Stonefly*, Tim Poland's first novel lures readers into a small Southwest Virginia mountain community full of beauty and tenderness, but also caustic gossip and unexpected violence. Deftly orchestrated suspense and intrigue advance the plot of this unusual crime mystery/fly-fishing novel with a female protagonist/healthcare worker. Poland's main character Sandy Holston, with a fitting last name as it is one of the region's primary rivers, upsets traditional Appalachian gender norms. His complex characters challenge readers to consider how society categorizes and

compartmentalizes violence, blurring distinctions between prey and predator, and villains and heroes, using the most seemingly gentle examples. In many ways, aggression and sometimes brutality unite the characters, despite Poland's creation of characters with arguably little in common. With poignant ecocritical commentary, Poland further challenges readers to question human-constructed separations from nonhuman animals and nature, particularly the arrogant and delusional human belief that they are in control. Although this is a sequel to his first book, a collection of short stories titled *The Safety of Deeper Water*, Poland's *Yellow Stonefly* stands securely on its own.

After his provocative Prologue, Poland wastes no time in sharing a bit of Sandy's past, though the telling is filtered through imagined gossip with hyperbole fertilizing truth. Regardless, readers begin to understand Sandy's complicated past and present, as well as the futility of simple binaries used to describe any individual. In her role as a nurse, she reveals some of her most caring behavior, especially with nursing home resident Edith. Indeed, Edith

had broken through Sandy's rigid clinical shell, demanded that she recognize that Edith, like the other residents, was more than a regimen of clinical tasks to be tended to ... Sandy had felt a layer of herself peeled away and found Edith, another woman who refused to live inside the lines someone else had drawn around her. (20)

Edith demonstrates to Sandy that compassion and strength are not incompatible. She also proves that women can live satisfying lives on their own terms and in ways often contradictory to prevailing patriarchal decrees.

Occasionally, on Sandy's days off, she and Edith deepen their bond by visiting the river, which unites them in their love of and history with the water in particular and nature more generally. While Sandy fly fishes using various hand-tied flies, including yellow stoneflies, which become significant in another area of Sandy's life later in the novel, Edith revels in simply being by the river in her "special place," a spot she had frequented as a child and then as an adult living alone. As these two women both innately connect to the natural environment, Poland beautifully captures Erich Fromm and E.O. Wilson's biophilia hypothesis, the idea that humans have a biological tendency to seek connections with nature. When recounting a story from her youth on a particularly hot Sunday, Edith tells Sandy,

So hot, well, I didn't even care. Waded right on out into the water there, still wearing my go-to-meeting dress.... My hair and that old dress floating all around me, swirling in the water....

Washed all the heat and preaching right out of me. Like I was flying above it all. Just closed my eyes and held tight to that branch, and after a while, it was like the river and me was made of the same thing. To this day, I think that's about the most perfect I ever felt." (73)

Clearly, Poland employs ecocritical tenets here as Edith expresses and embodies the oneness of all living things. These intimate exchanges continue to soften Sandy, endearing her to Edith, although readers witness other sides of Sandy's character that belie such tenderness.

Thus, Poland muddles easy categorization of the characters, even suggesting some of Sandy's behavior aligns with that of a ruthless survivalist, who blurs the lines between domestic and wild animal, and who poaches black bear and other animals in the Ripshin Valley. In an encounter with the new nursing home director, Sandy displays this conflicting, aggressive conduct, although readers could argue she was provoked by the insensitivity of the woman. Yet, provocation need not necessarily lead to aggression, no more than verbal exchanges inevitably prompt physical retaliation. Such is the argument made by many to distinguish human from nonhuman animals, thereby inflating the value of humans.

Even Sandy's interactions with the wild trout she catches and releases reveal a type of dominance and even violence. She is clearly not thinking of dinner, but the thrill of the experience:

On her second pass through the head of the pool her fly was hit. Hit hard.... The fish spun at the end of her line, fighting savagely. Judging by the force and ferocity of the struggle, she had found the prey she sought. Knowing the season was coming to a close, that this might well be the last good fish until next spring, Sandy delayed for a few moments, letting the fish run, dive, and spin a bit longer than necessary. She held her breath and luxuriated in the electric vibration pulsing from the fish, up her line and rod, on into her arm, her heart, not wanting the delicious tension to end. (244)

While some readers may interpret this account as Sandy's oneness with the fish, the word "prey" is telling. She has hooked this live wild creature and feels exhilaration in toying with it and in possessing the power to allow it to live or die.

Poland further complicates notions of predator and prey, violence and gentleness, as readers witness the evolution of Sandy's intimate relationship with the much older James Keefe, a kind widower who shares Sandy's love of the river and fly fishing. While both characters strive to protect the natural environment, they face an unforeseen, formidable force at the end of the novel that challenges them in ways difficult to imagine. Poland displays his best writing craft here, with the last chapters containing some of the most suspenseful, engaging action, leaving readers wholly captivated. Undeniably, a sign of compelling literature is its staying power, how the story, its characters, and its philosophical needling linger within the reader's mind long after the work is read. *Yellow Stonefly* is one such compelling novel.

Theresa L. Burriss

Theresa Burriss, an associate professor at Radford University, is the Director of the Appalachian Regional & Rural Studies Center, Chair of Appalachian Studies, and Director of Academic Outreach at the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center in Abingdon.