

Fighting to be Free

Andrew/Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

2024

a review of

Stay and Fight by Madeline ffitch. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019

“I began to identify as an anarchist nearly 20 years ago, after a demonstration where I realized that the people cooking the food, doing the dishes, and administering first-aid were mostly anarchists. Rather than a rigid political doctrine, I understand anarchism as an ethical stance focused on making justice and caring for each other without hierarchy, without asking permission from power-brokers, and with whatever tools we have available. I call on these ethics daily.”

—Madeline ffitch

Is a long-form creative writer from the anarchist tradition an anarchist novelist or an anarchist who writes novels? Is there such a thing as an anarchist tradition within fiction? I am not sure that these were the first questions swirling in my mind as I devoured *Stay and Fight*, the debut novel by Madeline ffitch.

The story did, though, take me directly back to the 1990s and the founding of an explicitly anarchist land project in rural Tennessee. For a brief time, that same feral land project was an infoshop, the sprawling site of several small festivals, and the publishing hub for the Fifth Estate. *Stay and Fight* reminds that communal living and idealistic homesteads are a durable feature of numerous countercultures. The stories told here also remind, in stark, stunning, and often hilarious terms, that we social creatures will smack into the hard wall of our limitations when we try to live in close proximity with our comrades.

The subtle, surreal, and miraculously anti-authoritarian aspects of the book come in the choices that ffitch makes as a narrative curator. Put plainly, the story gets told from multiple perspectives, with several main characters taking a turn at first-person storytelling. The novel makes no attempt to resolve or reconcile how jarring and juicy that this can be.

When the youngest character narrates, the story becomes as magical and fantastic as one might imagine, especially when this same character struggles with hostile encounters, neurodivergence, all mediated by an internal reality that is once more optimistic and marvelous than the real world might allow.

So often in mainstream media and social media, the culture wars get blasted in the most cartoonish of ways, but when culturally colorful and queer anarchists navigate small towns in Appalachia, these interactions are hardly reducible to slogans, denunciations, or memes. The myriad ways that ffitch forges these realities and surrealities are at times comic and chaotic, especially as we learn how the main characters negotiate conflict among themselves, even as they are each misfits and radicals compared to their larger social structure.

Anarchist idealisms in the past have come to die in utopian communes, when more rigid ideologies cannot suffer under the interpersonal and basic life realities of rain and snow, fights and finances, critters and compost. The ways these characters’ desires and dreams grow, falter, and evolve amid all of that are truly energizing and believable, even when they face outward struggles such as natural gas pipelines that have been a focal point for environmental radicals in this century.

As someone who moved to a rural area with similar dreams, but also was forced to change and adapt, I fully endorse the underlying idea of beautiful but difficult relationships, of deciding to stay and fight.
Andrew/Sunfrog writes frequently for the *Fifth Estate*.



Andrew/Sunfrog (Andy "Sunfrog" Smith)
Fighting to be Free
2024

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/415-summer-2024-2/fighting-to-be-free>
Fifth Estate #415, Summer 2024

fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net