



Stephen Florida

Gabe Habash

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Foxcatcher meets *The Art of Fielding*, *Stephen Florida* follows a college wrestler in his senior season, when every practice, every match, is a step closer to greatness and a step further from sanity. Profane, manic, and tipping into the uncanny, it's a story of loneliness, obsession, and the drive to leave a mark.

Stephen Florida Details

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From Reader Review Stephen Florida for online ebook

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

"I have reached many limits, but I have not reached my limit in wrestling. I know that for certain."
Stephen Florida is a college wrestler with one goal - to win the championship at the 133 lb weight classification in his senior year. He has been working towards this goal and will not let anything get in the way. This book is able to show what a singular, obsessive focus looks like, and what suffers, not the least of which is the person pursuing the goal.

I think the strength of this novel really shows at the end. (view spoiler)

It is truly difficult to understand whether or not the achievement is worth it. If spending all his energy and sacrificing everything he does, the striving, proves beneficial in the end.

"I had never guessed that wanting one thing for so long - wanting it at the cost of everything else - I never would have guessed that finally getting my hands on it could not feel really any different than how it had felt all along. How it didn't push out the boredom and the terror in.. every room I've ever spent time in."

I found the ending bleak but honest. It does seem to silence the voice in his head, the Frog Man. Recently some of us in the Newest Literary Fiction group have started discussing the book, and I've been SO intrigued by some darker theories that other readers have had, things I was oblivious to. I do not know the author's intent but feel like this book should make the ToB shortlist as it warrants ongoing discussion. (hide spoiler)]

Adam Dalva says

Barring a miracle, this is going to be my favorite book of the year - a totally unique wildchild of a novel tracking the senior year of a 133 pound division IV wrestler in North Dakota. We're firmly in Stephen's head the whole way, and Habash has created a unique voice here, an amalgam of obsession, diversion, exclamation points, and failures to communicate that, for all its literary accomplishment, is a pleasure to be around. I understand the drive to label S.F. an unreliable narrator, but despite the plot actions left aside or hinted at, he felt more like an incredibly reliable voice to me, metronomic in his consistency despite boogeymen lurking at every corner, weirdly self-aware for someone who has no self-awareness. His disinterest in aspects of the plot outside of wrestling allow Habash to weave in subplots seamlessly. This is a busy book that never feels like it.

In its obsessiveness, there are shades of THE UNIVERSAL BASEBALL ASSOCIATION, INC., there's a strong Nabokov vibe structurally (Nabokov loves to let planted digressions bloom in third act scene-work), and there are some nicely spaced out TRISTRAM SHANDY eruptions that kept my energy up by letting the voice change registers up.

The use of wrestling allows the book to have wonderful moments of physicality and, crucially with such an intense inner-monologue, gives us a sequence of deadlines that allow us to glide through the calendar year. The obstacles and impediments in the three-act structure are good ones (the big one is spoiled by pretty much everything I've read, but I won't mention it here), and there are very few supporting characters that don't end

up surprising us in plot. Mary Beth, in particular, is a star.

And the book is funny! Really funny, both in its language and asides and in its relentless focus on the body and failures to communicate. I kept laughing on the subway.

The ending is great also - no spoilers, but it's the rare one that gives you everything you want and leaves itself open for more. I'm a sucker for sports and sports movies and this sort of voice (not enough Joyce fans writing fiction these days), but even if you're not, this is one to read.

Michael Ferro says

Gabe Habash has constructed one of the most interesting and convincing character studies with STEPHEN FLORIDA that I've read in recent memory. Young college wrestler, Stephen Florida, is indeed a troubled young man. Picture a more modern, violent, and focused Holden Caulfield suited up in a onesie and you'll have a pretty accurate image of Florida. Obsession is a clear theme throughout this novel and Habash does an incredible job of building an incredibly detailed anti-hero in Florida, a man who begins the story with nothing on his mind but a national championship. And yet, despite the reader's understanding that Florida is a deeply flawed individual, capable of many uncomfortable actions and thoughts, Habash has given his main character so many levels that we cannot help but to root for this brutish thinker every time he sets foot on the mat—be it in the very real sense, or the proverbial one to wrestle is demons within his own mind.

As Florida's final year in college progresses, he's assaulted from every angle by the much bigger picture questions of love, familial loss, and just what to do with his life. As the tension mounts, Florida's world begins to disintegrate with a stunning realism.

For fans of the film "Foxcatcher" and the seminal novel THE CATCHER IN THE RYE, STEPHEN FLORIDA is simply a must-read. In fact, in this age of our shunning any focus on mental illness, the book should be required reading for an America that continues to grow more insular and isolated not just from the rest of the world, but from one another.

Julie Christine says

Coarse, poetic, and bleak, *Stephen Florida* is a novel about obsession and loneliness. Stephen Florida, a senior on a wrestling scholarship at a small private college in North Dakota, has one remaining *raison d'être*: to win the Division IV NCAA championship in his weight class (133). His singlemindedness drives him into some dark spaces, and when disaster strikes, he retreats into a depression that borders on madness.

Stephen is our narrator, and a most unreliable one at that. His voice is reminiscent of Holden Caulfield—wry and self-reflective—and yet somehow so very innocent and unaware. It is impossible not to be caught up in Stephen's creepily charming Eeyore-like affect, a young man full of his own blunt force, yet terrified of the gunk that lives in the shower drain, certain it is a substance alive and sinister. He and his teammates adhere to a brutal physical regimen, counting calories and pummeling bodies. Gabe Habash describes the discipline and desperation of these athletes so that you feel and smell their dripping sweat, are beside them in steaming gym basements, on wrestling mats slippery with their exertion.

Stephen is distracted by love early in this first semester and you feel him moving toward the light of hope and redemption, buoyed by a sweet and steady love. But distraction won't win him the trophy he covets. As his grip with reality slips, his eyes on the prize darken with desperation.

Habash writes with confidence and tight, sharply-honed skills. This novel is a character sketch with profundity and nuance. It is masculine and weird, tethered to reality and yet hovering above it, like the character of Stephen himself. I found it original and disconcerting; it is an unforgettable read, yet I was ready to move on, beyond its barren landscapes and desperate emotions. Recommended with a slight intake of breath, indicating hesitation.

Trudie says

I recently came across this quote about evaluating books and I think I will use it as my guide henceforth

For an adult reader, the possible verdicts are five: I can see this is good and I like it; I can see this is good but I don't like it; I can see this is good, and, though at present I don't like it, I believe with perseverance I shall come to like it; I can see that this is trash but I like it; I can see this is trash and I don't like it - W.H Auden

For this debut novel by Gabe Habash I am going with option C, this is good and with perseverance I shall come to like it. The good in this case is the extraordinary realisation of this single-minded wrestler known as Stephen Florida. Author Garth Greenwell may not be exaggerating when he says

Stephen Florida is an unforgettable addition to the canon of great literary eccentrics

The tough part, being inside this slightly unhinged head for the entire novel is hard work. Stephen does things that repulsed me, he is often manic and self sabotaging and yet Habash manages to make him endearing. No easy thing to achieve in a novel about a college wrestler.

Wrestling does make up a sizeable chunk of this book, it is described wonderfully and yet I think it might help to have some basic knowledge of the sport. My only point of reference was the film *Foxcatcher* but reading about wrestling strategy eventually boiled down to a blur of homoerotic body positions and a sort of overheated machismo. Eye-gouging, spitting, a lot of peeing in places unbecoming. In short it's a bit of a testosterone fest. As such I read this novel in short bursts.

What kept me engaged throughout was the humour and wry observations that we get as Stephen obsessively fights his way to his goal. I particularly liked the section where a careers councillor sends him out to shadow an oil field worker, the whole incident is laced with dark humour creepiness and a yearning loneliness. It would have made an outstanding short story.

The beginning and end of this novel are particularly strong but the middle sagged under the weight of disconnected snippets and oddball run-ins with potentially murderous jazz teachers and abusive coaches. I didn't think the novel really needed those aspects or rather they were not fleshed out well enough to appreciate.

In summary this might be one of those books I admire but do not love, however this is a strong debut novel and one I feel may pop up on something like the Tournament of Books for 2018.

(For those trying to decide if this book is for them, many reviews compare it to *The Art of Fielding* and Habash himself cites Roberto Bolano as an influence. This review in the Atlantic put a good perspective on this novel for me and actually nudged me closer to the 4 stars I ended up giving it.)

jo says

this left me breathless. more when i recover.

*** (recovered) ***

the premise of this book is entirely irrelevant to the what this book is like, or what it does. in fact, i have no idea what this book does or what is about (though i'll try to say something about this in a minute) but here is the premise: stephen florida (the strange last name is the result of a clerical error stephen decides not to fix) is the star of a north dakota university wrestling team and his one dream is to win the division championship in kenosha in his senior year. he has no ambition other than that and, if i remember correctly, no life goals of any kind, including life itself, after that.

so let me talk about a) Hanya Yanagihara's enthusiastic endorsement of this first novel and b) the cover.

i have no idea if gabe and hanya are MFA buddies or MFA teacher-student, but what i know is, if hanya endorses a book it is likely to be 1. awesome 2. weird as hell and 3. weird in the most awesome way possible. witness yanagihara's first novel, *The People in the Trees*, a jaw-dropping masterpiece of weirdness, daring, and writerly self-assurance. (gabe habash too seems to be quite undaunted by *The First Novel*; he goes all out on the weird).

the cover is gorgeous, but has nothing to do with anything. as it should. (just so you know: no large feline appears in this novel and the novel is not set in the everglades).

the closest i can come to box this book is in "coming of age," but heck, this is some coming of age. the most conventional coming-of-age feature of the book is the love story, but that too is, if not *exactly* weird, then complex and intense and adult.

this is writerly fireworks, a fabulous journey into the mind and adventures of an unpleasant character (by the end i wanted to be stephen's personal savior), a deep gaze into the heartbreak of teenage masculinity, a hard look at madness, and a major kick-ass vindication of all the mad paranoid obsessed people who find mad paranoid obsessive ways to keep themselves afloat.

also, if you are looking for a story, yeah, there is a hell of a story. (this is for you, simon)

Kevin says

One of those books I casually opened to get a taste of and was pulled in by the unusual narrator. And then what was merely unusual (maybe even quirky) became crazier and crazier as it became evident that Mr. Florida (not his real name) is unstable or, at best, delusional. The middle part, where the narration becomes more fractured, sort of reminded me of *Letters to Wendy's* (one of my favorite crazy books ever). As a

soundtrack, I was listening to 90s indie band Guv'ner, and their disregard of proper song structures seemed to fit the reading experience pretty well.

This is a pretty bold debut by Habash and he captures the suffocating pressure of solo sports as well as the cold flat landscape of North Dakota. It will be interesting to see what he does next.

Shawn Mooney says

The eponymous hero of Gabe Habash's debut novel is a young, sinewy, macho stud at a North Dakota college on a wrestling scholarship, hellbent on attaining a championship title.

If you're rolling your eyes already, you stop it right now. My hatred of all things sports-related is unrivalled, and I absolutely loved this novel.

Stephen is—to put it mildly—singled-minded in his devotion to wrestling. He got into it in school back in Florida and after his parents' tragic deaths when he was a teenager his motivation tripled as a way to shelve the grief.

He's cocky and awkward, but somehow has managed to befriend a fellow wrestler at the college ("I'd rather be alone, and being with Linus is the same as being alone but also a fix for loneliness, a positive solitude") and stumble into a romantic relationship with a classmate ("Every step of her life dents the earth harder, like she's sucking up more air than everyone else"). Through his bumbling attempts to connect with them, we see a lot of weird and wonderful bits of Stephen beneath all that strong, silent bravado.

So that when his behaviour starts to get weirder and weirder, I was already so deeply invested in him that I fretted over just how far over the line he was going to go. I certainly won't spoil anything but let's just say I was holding my breath a lot of the time, wondering how violent things might get, how psycho Stephen might turn out to be. I loved how Habash kept this tension throughout yet still gave me such an emotionally satisfying ending.

The descriptive passages about the actual wrestling were a joy to read. I am not interested in wrestling beyond its innate homoerotic potential, and probably didn't understand a lot of what I was reading, but I was transfixed.

Stephen was written off as a strange guy, none too bright, by most of the other characters, but Habash gives us access to the quirky workings of his mind. Sometimes that was disturbing, to be sure, but often it was elating.

Most reviewers talk about how deeply this novel explores masculinity, intimacy and sexuality: it sure does all that! But what grabbed me by the collar was the depth of characterization and the brilliant writing that wrested Stephen up and off the page. Easily one of the best debut novels of 2017. Like the wrestler at its heart, the story is enigmatic and not easily pinned down.

Thomas says

Stephen Florida addresses so many important topics: masculinity, mental health, men's complex

relationships with sport, and more. Gabe Habash instills our protagonist - Stephen Florida, a college wrestler in his senior season - with a distinct, unsettling voice that remains consistent throughout the story. Stephen's obsession with wrestling overlies deeper themes that many of us may relate to, including how we deal or refuse to deal with loss, the desire to win at *something* to regain control, and finding comfort in what is familiar to us.

I wish the novel had more to delve into these complex, pressing issues though. While Stephen is a unique protagonist, I got bored of his narrative. I wanted to see him explore his mental health or relationship issues with more actual progress or character development. I see that as a narcissist and as someone who represses a lot, Stephen would struggle with that path to recovery or increased self-awareness. But for the sake of defying toxic masculinity, I would have loved to see him make more progress in therapy or even to have read more scenes featuring his potential efforts toward growth, even if these efforts were eventually thwarted.

A few of my trusted friends on Goodreads loved this one, so maybe check it out if you think you would dig it based on the synopsis. The book contains some violent descriptions and lots of bodily fluids, so prep for that. I acknowledge perhaps I wanted something from the book that maybe would have weakened its appeal to others, and yet, I still stand by my desire for more from Stephen. Habash exhibits a wonderfully odd writing style in this book, so I am still excited to read his next work.

Meike says

Seriously, how can a story about a disturbed amateur wrestler in North Dakota be so compelling? How?? This is a brilliant book about loneliness and toxic masculinity, and while its protagonist is an anti-hero with pretty disgusting habits, the reader can't help but feel with him.

Stephen Florida is a senior at Oregsborg College, but for him, college is not about his studies, making friends or having fun. He is obsessed with wrestling and would do anything to finally win the championship - not only does this obsession give him direction in life, it also gives him the opportunity to turn away from the loneliness, fear and pain he feels while focusing on this one goal which promises him almost religious deliverance.

Due to his single-mindedness and suppressed trauma, Stephen has trouble connecting with people, and the situation is intensified by the extreme competition in the wrestling team and the male rituals of combat sports. When he suffers a knee injury and consequently fears that he might not be able to compete in the championship, his psyche starts to unravel...

Habash wrote a great story, but the real wonder here is the invention of Stephen Florida as a character - he is so complex, contradictory, and often mean, but at the same time it's obvious how much heart he has, but that it is trapped inside his own sadness. I don't think Habash is planning to write a follow-up, but I would definitely read it.

Full disclosure: If he decides to write about something else, I will read it as well! :-)

LeAnne says

Give me a disturbed narrator, and I'm generally in love from the get go. In that light, Steven Forster - a collegiate wrestler accidentally dubbed with the wrong name by an aging, nearsighted school registrar - should have made my heart throb.

Mistakes bubble in and out of his story. He starts his life wrapped in an error that manifests in a better chance for success - his vanished twin has given him two placentas from which to draw strength. An accident kills his parents when he is young. A green notebook is mistakenly left where he can find it.

When this obsessive and relentless young wrestler makes an error on the mat, a tangible price is exacted, and he becomes stranger yet. Until Stephen Florida makes that mistake and ends up suffering a torn meniscus - somewhere around the halfway point - I'm sorry to say that the book initially bored me nearly to tears, despite it being peppered with philosophical meanderings and dark tension. His love interest, Mary Beth, can abide anything she says - except boredom. I'm with ya, girl.

The good stuff: great mood setting and high creep factor. The author puts The Big O into Obsessiveness, and that is exceptionally well done here. For those of you who follow collegiate wrestling, the matches and moves ring pretty true (although there were a LOT of them). I read that the author has a family member, maybe an uncle, who used to wrestle and that he went over all the wrestling scenes carefully to tweak them. John Irving would be proud! Off the mats, since he is in the weight class of 133 pounds, Stephen Florida eats like a ballerina or an anorexic or a jockey...again, very realistic.

The freaky stuff: There is an offscreen character Stephen calls "the frog man" who may or may not slip him notes under his dorm room door or whisper to him through an old CB radio and via a vinyl album. We hear of old incidents with disemboweled goats and encounter a gorilla mask (twice) and present day goats (twice). There is a scary roustabout named Shane who will give you the willies, and the last few sentences will make you wonder.

Cautionary stuff: there are myriad discussions of snot, vomit, and other bodily things best not thought about. I got the vague feeling that the author was trying to echo Eileen a bit, but to lesser effect for me. They just pointlessly disgusted me here, particularly the recycling of Chinese take-out. By this point in the story, it was an unnecessary and over the top bit of drama to yet again show how odd Stephen Florida was.

The following critiques might blow the story for you, so they are tagged as such.(view spoiler)

In sum, if you're a fan of narcissistic narrators or enjoy wrestling and can manage some disturbing body issues, go for it. Most everybody but me absolutely raved about the book. I've got to admit that The Art of Fielding is one of my favorite books, and although this book is a creepy, schizophrenic cousin to it, certain aspects seemed almost a rip-off rather than an homage. If you have read both books, you'll see the obvious parallels. If you have read The Art of Fielding recently and remember its details, then you too might feel offended for that author. The earrings were the last straw for me - totally a copy cat obscurity - otherwise, I'd have given this four stars.

I could not love it, but perhaps I just don't have enough magnesium in my diet... a joke that only Stephen Florida would get.

Drew says

5+

Holy shit, this book. This is one of the most intense things I've read in a long, long while. Should go on a shelf with AMERICAN PSYCHO and the Patrick Melrose novels as a close-close-close look inside the head of someone driven and disturbed. The book grips you like a headlock and doesn't let go even when you think you're going to run out of air. Hot damn.

Melki says

Wrestling is unprejudiced and open minded, and it's impossible to argue with. It always tells the truth, and that's why so many men love it.

There are things that can be expressed only by wrestling.

Stephen Florida's whole world is wrestling. A C student, at best, he's spent his college years academically dabbling while he throws his all into training, and tournaments. Even his coach describes him as a "solipsistic mess." Now, in just a few short months, college will end. Stephen will graduate.

Then what?

Why did I latch on to this? I'm going to be let out in six months. With nowhere to go, what am I supposed to do? When did the future become as unfaithful as the past?

As Stephen himself will tell you: **Stephen Florida is losing it.**

I have wondered dozens of times whether I have a special skill at turning the people I come across in my life into ghosts, into glass, temporary figures. Maybe someday one of them will look me up.

I honestly have no clue why I loved this book so much. I really don't enjoy the type of wrestling that doesn't involve tables, ladders and chairs, and guys called The Undertaker. Stephen is well, he's bat shit crazy, and pretty damned unlikable. And, yet . . . I couldn't stop rooting for him.

And while he's calling me a bitch pussy and banging my ribs I kneel down and get him onto my

shoulders like a baby lamb, he's a baby lamb now. He is guided by my arms to the mat, and thereupon he finds his disappointment.

I'm pretty sure this is going to be one of my top three favorites for the year, and I can't even begin to tell you why.

"I want a good match, you two. Good luck." And just like that, he steps back, and we head into the fuckery.

Roxane says

What a strange, strange, utterly intriguing novel. The prose style is so staccato, so relentless in its commitment to be what it is. This is not a book that is going to cater to the reader or to anyone's expectations of what a novel should be, how a protagonist should be, how a story should read. The writer's commitment to the prose style is just... mind blowing. Writing like this takes guts. This isn't a book I could love but it is a book I will forever admire for its ambition and execution.

Jessica Sullivan says

After reading several lackluster books recently about college-age protagonists meandering through life, I've come to the conclusion that I only really enjoy these kinds of stories when the characters have a truly distinct voice.

In walks Stephen Florida.

This book is absolutely mesmerizing and unlike anything I've ever read. And yet it's not the kind of book I would recommend to just anyone. Stephen is one of the strangest and most disturbing characters I've encountered in quite some time. He has just recently begun his senior season on the college wrestling team and he is obsessively focused on one thing and one thing only: winning.

As his season progresses and he pursues his quest for greatness, Stephen's mind spirals further off the deep end and his narration becomes more unreliable. This is a guy who's a bit of a sociopath to begin with, so that's saying something. Stephen's the kind of character who says things like: "Sometimes I wonder, if I were a character in a book, would I be sympathetic? Would I make a good good guy?"

The answer is, he is strangely sympathetic in spite of himself. Beneath Stephen's singular focus on wrestling is an undercurrent of grief and a desperate longing for control and meaning by any means necessary.

There's a pervasive sense of menace throughout as Stephen loses his grip on reality—an uncanniness that Habash writes with perfect subtlety.

Nothing I write here will adequately convey just how bizarre and unsettling this debut novel is. At times I was reminded of the strange protagonist in Patty Yumi Cottrell's *Sorry for Disrupting the Peace* and the vague sense of foreboding in Iain Reid's *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*.

I'm hesitant to recommend Stephen Florida to just anyone, but I imagine it will have a dedicated cult following among other weirdos like me who live for these kinds of characters.
