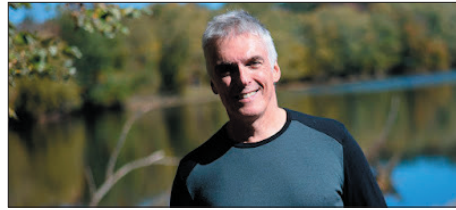


The Tree Stand
by Jay Atkinson,
Livingston Press, Alabama, 2022,
318 pages. \$19.95.

Review by Ed Meek



Jay Atkinson is the author of two novels, a short story collection and five nonfiction books. He received Massachusetts Book Award Honors for *Massacre on the Merrimack*, a compelling tale of a vicious Abenaki attack in 1697 that killed twenty-seven men, women and children. But when captives are taken, they plot and carry out revenge on their captors. It's an illuminative well-researched book about a murky period in our local history. *The Tree Stand* is a collection of seven short stories set in the present. On the surface, the two books don't have much in common but there are some carryovers and both are well-worth reading.

The stories in *The Tree Stand* are all set in an area in northern Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire. All of the stories are long and well-developed. Some are novella length. So, instead of a slice of life "seen glancingly from the side" as Emma Donohue said of the short story, Atkinson's stories have a continuing sense of time as novels usually do. Nonetheless, they do have "a single mood," as Poe put it. Like Rick Bass, Thomas McGuane, and Ray Carver, Atkinson writes from the point of view of hard-scrabble characters from the working class: firefighters, builders, rugby players, small farmers, and local musicians. Quite a bit of time is spent in bars. As in *Massacre on the Merrimack*, bad things sometimes happen to unsuspecting characters. Nearly everyone in these stories works really hard. They are sometimes sustained by friends and strangers who do them a good turn, and other times by nature, or the skills they have developed. When life is going well for these folks, they are part of a community that lifts them up, but in Atkinson's world you just never know when something terrible might happen: a car accident, a fall out of a burning house, a cancer diagnosis.

In the title story, a down and out carpenter who can't find work is dumped by his wife who is probably sleeping with her boss. He needs to sell his half-finished house at a loss in order to move on. He takes his bow and sets out to hunt deer out of necessity. When he strikes his prey "satisfaction lay in the fact that, despite his troubles of late, Goody now had enough venison to last out the winter...at least that was something." In this and other stories, Atkinson immerses us in the actions of his character so it feels as if we are there in the woods.

"Bergeron Framing and Remodeling," is an over-the-top story about a hard-working and partying crew of brothers (with help from their old man) who build for twelve hours a day during the week and then buzz through half a dozen grams of coke, get drunk and have sex until Monday morning when it starts all over again. They're forced to work double time when the youngest brother discovers he's not impervious to illness. A similar situation occurs in "Lowell Boulevard," a story of firefighters who are EMTs dealing with horrific accidents, when an unexpected trag-

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edy derails a team of best friends. Yet when a widow can't afford to pay an ambulance bill, the fire department administrator writes it off. The main character, Glenn, realizes how lucky he is to marry the woman he loves and face a bright future of "healthy, athletic children ... a house he would build with his own hands." Reading these stories, those of us who survive and thrive today realize how lucky we are.

"Hi-Pine Acres" is written from the point of view of an older woman who lives with her son on a small farm in southern New Hampshire. She's the one who does all the work but she isn't getting any younger. When a realtor makes an offer to split up the farm, she's faced with a dilemma. In this and other stories, Atkinson knows the language of his subject. Here he describes Katherine's container truck.

The interior of the truck smelled of moldy hay and livestock; she swept out the tick that littered the floor, walked back to the cowshed, and rolled out a pair of sloshing, ten-gallon milk cans. Manhandling them onto a dolly, she ran them up the ramp, secured them with bungee cords, and then went back to the shed where earlier that morning, after the milking when it was still dark, she had tied up a week-old calf.

In two other upbeat stories, Atkinson gives us a humorous insider's view of a rugby team and a seat in the audience of a local bar with talented live acts and friendships formed over years that reward the main character when she needs a place to stay and a band to play with.

The long story format takes a little getting used to in our current era of immediate gratification but the effort is well worth it. "The Tree Stand" is a setting that allows the character in the title story, Goody, to sit still from a blind, observe and wait to strike with his bow. Like Goody, Jay Atkinson hits his mark.