

What was your favorite part of the book?
What was your least favorite?
Did you race to the end, or was it more of a slow burn?
Which scene has stuck with you the most?
What did you think of the writing? Are there any standout sentences?
Did you reread any passages? If so, which ones?
Would you want to read another book by this author?
Did reading the book impact your mood? If yes, how so?
What surprised you most about the book?
How did your opinion of the book change as you read it?
If you could ask the author anything, what would it be?
How does the book's title work in relation to the book's contents? If you could give the book a new title, what would it be?
Is this book overrated or underrated?
Did this book remind you of any other books?
How did it impact you? Do you think you'll remember it in a few months or years?
Would you ever consider re-reading it? Why or why not?
Who do you most want to read this book?
Are there lingering questions from the book you're still thinking about?
Did the book strike you as original?

FICTION

Stewart O’Nan Returns to the Fictional Maxwell Family

By Dominic Smith

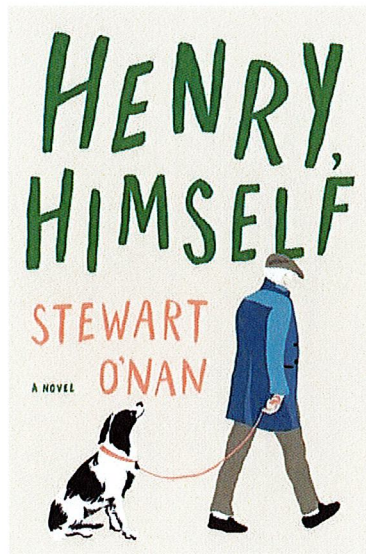
May 2, 2019

HENRY, HIMSELF

By Stewart O’Nan

369 pp. Viking. \$27

When we watch Henry Maxwell, an aging Pittsburger, wind the clocks of his house forward on the spring eve of daylight saving time, we are witnessing a man at the cusp of a new century. It’s 1998 and Henry is 74. A retired Westinghouse engineer, he has been married to the same woman, Emily, for nearly 50 years. After puttering in his basement with a jigsaw, cutting pieces for a spice rack that will be installed at his summer cottage in Chautauqua, he begins to move through the house, ministering to the clocks. “He wound the Black Forest cuckoo clock in the breakfast nook, waking the bird, inserted the key in the face of the grandfather clock and twisted, making the chimes ring as he brought the minute hand full circle. ... Henry fixed the clock radios in the children’s rooms and the banjo clock in the den before adding an hour to his father’s watch and setting it on his dresser.” He then turns to his wife, who is reading in bed, and proclaims, “We are officially in the future.”



But the future exists for Henry as if through a fogged pane of glass in Stewart O’Nan’s beautifully spare and poignant new novel, “Henry, Himself.” It’s the present and the past that keep Henry transfixed. In the here-and-now, there are the daily household chores and repairs, the redeeming of coupons, the endless ad hoc runs to Home Depot, the doctor appointments and ferrying of attic treasures for the annual church rummage sale. There is the timeless and arcane problem of how to keep the family dog from peeing all over the tender spring lawn. Henry enjoys nothing more than being in the throes of an errand or repair, a baseball game murmuring from the radio, his hands free to mend and his mind free to wander. In those wanderings, his days of camaraderie and deprivation glimmer up

from World War II, a boyhood infatuation with his piano teacher surges, and a tenderness flares toward his children, yearning for a simpler time before the onset of their uneasy adulthoods. One gets the sense that their childhood bedrooms have been preserved like museums, as a monument to hope.

Returning to the Maxwell family for a third book (Henry’s death presides over “Wish You Were Here” and “Emily, Alone”), O’Nan uses short vignettes to capture the seasons and events of a single year. There’s a shooting at a nearby backyard gathering, the death of a longtime acquaintance, an accident that upends holiday plans, but mostly there are the quiet, unspooling days at the end of Henry’s productive life. He’s gone to war, raised a family, forged a career and now he tries to hold the forces of chaos at bay, whether it’s a kitchen drawer that won’t close right or an eyesore of an old TV antenna out at the lake house. This is a novel that charms not through the complexities of its plot but through its subtle revelations of character and the human condition. Most of us know a man like Henry — the dwindling, handy churchgoer; the dog lover; the golfer; the unassuming patriot who still enjoys unfurling the American flag at the summer house — but we know him from the outside. The gift of O’Nan’s fiction is to immerse us deeply in Henry’s essence, in his desire to be useful and his nostalgia for a vanished way of life, for the forgotten homespun rituals and for houses with slate roofs and ornate gables. And when we watch him winding the clocks forward, we find ourselves wishing he could hold the minute hand motionless for just a while longer.