Backman, Fredrik. *The Winners*. Trans. by Neil Smith. New York: Atria Books, 2022. 673 pages. Hardcover, $28.99. E-book available.

Reviewed by Rachel Franklin.

Fredrik Backman’s *The Winners* is the third novel in a three-book series about the fictional Swedish town, Beartown, in which life revolves around the ice hockey team and its rivalry with that of the nearby town, Hed. There is violence (physical and verbal) both inside and outside the rink, corruption at the club, a devious politician, ambitious journalists, a young boy seeking revenge, and dreams of ice hockey stardom. Through all this, the novel comments upon masculinity in sports, the ways in which sports can exclude and include, and parenthood and mental health. Readers should not expect a novel which focuses primarily on ice hockey. Whilst it is central to life in Beartown, detailed depictions of the games or the statistics are not present here. Rather, it acts as a way of understanding the characters and the way they see, and interact with, the world.

Readers should not worry if they have not read the previous two books, as there is enough recapping to understand the various motivations of the characters. This is one of the strengths of the novel, and one of the ways in which the novel is structured; the narrative voices want you to understand, indeed takes it as a condition for your presence as a reader of the text. “Do you want to understand the people who live in two hockey towns? Really understand them? Then you need to know the worst that they are capable of,” (8) the narrator states. Asking questions of the reader is a common device through all three books in the series, and it has lost none of its confrontational manner. What makes it an affective mode of address is that it carries the abrupt, no-nonsense tone of voice that one associates with Beartown as one continues to read the novel. From almost the very beginning you are being dragged into the town, and given how the novel highlights interconnectivity, the way in which everybody’s actions affect everyone else, it might just inspire a sense of complicity within the reader.

The novel delves into the thought processes of the characters, often through a remarkable use of free indirect discourse. This combined with a continuous third person present narrator gives an immediacy and contemporaneity to the events of the text. The narrator seems multiple, often taking on the voices of the characters, but also having an omniscient voice of someone who belongs to the town and comments upon what the town people think, feel, and do. The narrator refers to ‘us’, ‘we’, and ‘our’, acting as the reader’s guide through the fictional town, but how much we can trust this voice remains questionable, especially given the excessive levels of sentimentality and obvious fondness they have for the town.

Given the more brutal contents of the novel, the subjectivity of the narrative voice is one of the novel’s strengths. In the three-book series there are two rapes depicted in detail, enough detail that I would suggest a content warning, and in both cases the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the victims are focused on to a much higher degree than the perpetrators’. The narrative voice never attempts to be neutral. It draws attention to the silences, silencings, and euphemisms that are used as silencings, that often accompany the aftermath of rape. The assaults are always referred to as rape, apart from when the euphemisms are being critiqued. Both the multiplicity of the narrative voice and the graphic depictions can make the novel, and the previous two in the series, a difficult read. They confront the reader with the interconnectivity of violent sports, narratives and language of success in sports, and sexual violence.

The only point at which the novel falls down is the aforementioned sentimentality and romanticisation espoused by the narrative voice, which is sometimes tiring. Whilst it reflects the sentimental vision of ice hockey and its players held by the characters within the novel, and is certainly not out of place in a text which features a sports team, it sometimes heightens the fictionality of the characters in a detrimental way. A prime example of this is the character of Benji. Through his sexuality, much like through the depiction of rape, the novel makes an up-to-date social commentary on small town life and the values it feels it needs to defend. In both the verbal and physical violence Benji suffers through the three books, realism is the main mode of representation. At the same time, he is referred to as “a boy with sad eyes and a wild heart” (660) and “the boy in the forest, sad and wild” (661). Combined with the tragedies that follow him through the novels, this casts him as a gothic male archetype. This is one of the ways in which the novels demonstrate how we create fictions about those important to us and those we admire and how they do not always mesh with reality. Indeed, there is an emphasis upon ‘stories’. Towards the end of *The Winners* it is stated “We have nothing but stories here” (669). However, whilst the novel handles its realism and social commentary spectacularly and its comments on ‘stories’ and fictionality effectively, the sentimentality is heavy-handed and much more clumsily drawn than other more successful elements of the novel. This sometimes leads to a sugary fictionality of character.

On the whole, *The Winners* is a fantastic novel which emphasises the ways in which sports, in this case ice hockey, can intersect with one’s everyday life and affect the economy and institutions of a town. The characters are well-drawn, the social commentary is effective in its confrontation, and, in places, the novel is very funny. It is longer and better paced than the two previous novels and has more focus and direction than the second in the series, *Us Against You* (2018). Whilst its sentimentality can sometimes create a heightened fictionality and a depiction of family that comes across as a paean, it, and indeed the rest of the series, is a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of sport, violence, and masculinity.