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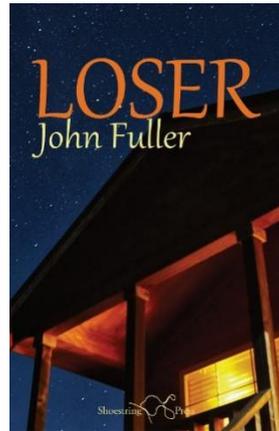
## Book review of *Loser*

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**John Fuller. *Loser* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2021).**

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*Loser* is the eleventh work of prose fiction by the noted author and poet John Fuller, Emeritus Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford and past winner of the Whitbread and Forward prizes. Comprising a total of 108 pages, the novella tells the story of Graham, a curmudgeonly middle-aged man who lives in a quiet cul-de-sac in north Oxford. Having recently lost Maddie, his vivacious cello-playing wife, much of the work is based around Graham's indecision on how to deal with her so-called "pod", a glorified garden shed originally built as a place for his spouse to practice her musical instrument. With no friends and a distant relationship with his two children, Graham is thus grappling with how to proceed in life. Through examining

different facets of his character and personality, the work deftly portrays the turbulent waters of post-Brexit Britain through the prism of a grieving middle-aged man's worldview.

Through Graham's social interactions – be they with his motley crew of neighbours or with others who cross his path – one of the main themes that becomes apparent is his general displeasure and rage at the world. This is highlighted, too, by the frequent references to his stratospherically high blood pressure readings, with his ire seemingly provoked by a variety of unrelated things. The major source of anger, though, is the expression of Graham's apparently groundless lack of empathy for homeless people and the socially excluded. Indeed, an ill-fated run-in with a young down-and-out is one of the turning points of the work, which leads to unexpected consequences.

There are myriad other topics which are touched on in the book, including issues of race and ethnicity (for example, Graham's disastrously misguided attempt to make his son's British-born girlfriend of Korean heritage feel "at home" by cooking her an inedible Asian-style meal), politics (clearly to the right of the spectrum, Graham sneers at his liberal *Guardian*-reading neighbour, but is also not a fan of Boris Johnson), and religion (Graham is a churchgoer, and the moral compass of the story is embodied by his neighbour Father Eustace, the parish priest). However, the work's length means that these issues are merely suggested, rather than discussed in detail. Nonetheless, this does not make the book feel incomplete; rather, it adds breadth, depth, and context to the core events that take place.

The novella's stark title – *Loser* – is impacting and can clearly be interpreted in different ways. As such, it can be argued that it denotes the character of Graham himself, as a man who has lost his wife, and who is in the process of ostensibly losing his health, his relationship with his children, and potentially his whole existence. It could also be stated that

the title reflects the concept of “winners and losers”, with the latter being the marginalised and socially-excluded homeless people who influence the book’s course of events. And finally, the notion of loss could also be applied to a portrayal of wider society – for example, as a depiction of a changing Britain where formerly established social mores are being eroded, an issue much lamented by people like Graham.

One important allusion in the book is to the paradox of Schrödinger’s cat. Indeed, the notion that something can be simultaneously alive and dead seems to embody the torpor of Graham’s own existence. Initially presented as a family in-joke regarding the late Maddie’s music-making in the soundproof “pod”, the ramifications of the paradox – and its continuing links to the “pod” – become increasingly apparent as the work progresses, thus foreshadowing the dramatic events that mark the latter third of the novella.

In terms of the quality of the writing, Fuller’s style is clear and accessible, and as an acclaimed poet he has the talent for accurately describing characters in an economic but eminently insightful way, as well as for transforming mundane minutiae into full and well-defined observations. The tempo is excellent, and though an oft-levelled criticism levelled at novellas is that they can seem underdeveloped, this is certainly not the case with *Loser* – as such, it is an excellent representative of the genre. No word is extraneous, and each description, observation, and event builds neatly into a tightly-constructed whole that leads the reader seamlessly through the work’s events. In short, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the author’s pedigree, Fuller has created an impacting book that merits a wide readership.