



Still Life: Adventures in Taxidermy

Melissa Milgrom

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It's easy to dismiss taxidermy as a kitschy or morbid sideline, the realm of trophy fish and jackalopes or an anachronistic throwback to the dusty diorama. Yet theirs is a world of intrepid hunter-explorers, eccentric naturalists, and gifted museum artisans, all devoted to the paradoxical pursuit of creating the illusion of life.

Into this subculture of insanely passionate animal lovers ventures journalist Melissa Milgrom, whose journey stretches from the anachronistic family workshop of the last chief taxidermist for the American Museum of Natural History to the studio where an English sculptor, granddaughter of a surrealist artist, preserves the animals for Damien Hirst's most disturbing artworks. She wanders through Mr. Potter's Museum of Curiosities in the final days of its existence to watch dealers vie for preserved Victorian oddities, and visits the Smithsonian's offsite lab, where taxidermists transform zoo skins into vivacious beasts. She tags along with a Canadian bear trapper and former Roy Orbison impersonator--the three-time World Taxidermy Champion--as he resurrects an extinct Irish elk using DNA studies and Paleolithic cave art for reference; she even ultimately picks up a scalpel and stuffs her own squirrel. Transformed from a curious onlooker to an empathetic participant, Milgrom takes us deep into the world of taxidermy and reveals its uncanny appeal.

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