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Review of Real Life

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Wallace is a fish out of water, and he knows it. A gay black man from Alabama in a Midwestern university graduate biochemistry program peopled with white and Asian-American students, Wallace is alone and awkwardly unique. Problem is, so is everyone else.

Through language wizardry, essayist and short story writer Taylor's debut novel encapsulates in one weekend a life that seems all too real. Wallace's world is by turns, alien, welcoming, and violent. Wallace is in and out of relations with his small circle of friends and enemies. It seems no one can say or do anything that will not provoke an argument.

Wallace's "real life" is one of unrelenting angst, his relationships strained, including a violent one with a man who insists he is not gay. The faculty head of his program wonders whether Wallace should even be there. He hates it all.

As brilliantly-written as the novel is, the constant conflicts, unyielding anguish, and pages of tortured ruminations, while anchoring the novel in the "real life" it strives to portray, have the potential to wear out the less-than-committed reader. It is a relief, therefore, that Taylor concludes the novel with a hopeful flashback to Wallace's matriculation, when friendships are new and promising.