



America's Report Card: A Novel

John McNally

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America's Report Card offers a brilliant vision of contemporary American life that is frightening, darkly hilarious, and tinged with satire. John McNally tells the story of two unlucky people who forge an improbable yet possibly life-saving connection in a world overshadowed by the Patriot Act and No Child Left Behind -- a world in which hulking government bureaucracies and vast corporations join forces to numb the populace into apathy with various standardization and surveillance programs. But McNally sees hope in the daily experiences of his characters: sometimes, haphazardly, by going about their own very particular lives, people circumvent the official program and begin to actively claim lives of freedom and dignity. *America's Report Card* is an arresting and humane portrait of life taking place in the margins, outside the stunted imagination of government and media.

As in his critically acclaimed novel *The Book of Ralph*, McNally dazzles with characters like Jainey O'Sullivan -- a lonely, confused, purple-and-green-haired sometime truant, Jainey cares so little about high school that on her final standardized test, she writes an essay heaping scorn on the test administrators even as she asks her faceless reader for help. Charlie Wolf leads a fairy-tale graduate student life, with just enough money and clout to keep him in books, vodka, a threadbare apartment, and a beautiful, intellectual girlfriend. But the bohemian dream starts to crumble when Charlie takes a job scoring standardized tests and finds himself surrounded by people who are either plodding blindly along or caught up in wild conspiracy theories. When Charlie and Jainey stumble upon one another, they also stumble upon their own bravery and compassion. They try to protect each other from their habitual bad luck and the shadowy threats lurking at the edges of their lives, and what ensues doesn't follow any prescribed course.

The official version of American life today may get the broad strokes and primary colors right, but *America's Report Card* reveals how the government and the media overlook the corners and shadows where our individual realities unfold all too often in chaotic, precarious, and bewildering ways. This wholly original, wildly entertaining novel mirrors our part in the dark but frequently redemptive comedy that is life.

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