

Don't Skip Out on Me

Willy Vlautin

Singer-songwriter Vlautin's latest (*The Free*) is another quietly devastating addition to his growing canon of spare and heartrending contemporary Westerns. At 21, Horace Hopper is ready to leave the mountains of Nevada and the only stability he has ever known—herding sheep at the ranch of his guardian, Mr. Reese—to become a champion boxer and to fulfill the destiny laid out in his self-help books. At 72, Mr. Reese needs Horace to keep the ranch going but knows he cannot stand in the way of his surrogate son's dreams. On his own for the first time in Tucson, Horace finds a trainer and changes his name (no Paiute has ever been a famous fighter). As the fights get harder and the physical toll becomes greater, Horace's withering self-doubt threatens to consume him, just as Mr. Reese decides it's time to call him home. **VERDICT** Vlautin's unerring ability to write without artifice or judgment about hardscrabble people trying to do good makes him the literary heir to the late Kent Haruf. This is a deeply compassionate story made more poignant for its unadorned simplicity, with an ending that lands with the emotional force of a Horace Hopper one-two punch.