Will Leitch's 'How Lucky' follows a cheeky sleuth working to solve a mystery from the cockpit of a wheelchair

Review by Hamilton Cain

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Back in January, between the red-hatted insurrection on Capitol Hill and the holistically choreographed inauguration, my oldest son died suddenly of sepsis triggered by his neuromuscular disorder, Type 1 spinal muscular atrophy, also known as SMA. Diagnosed as an infant, he was not expected to live past his second birthday. Through the herculean labors of physicians, nurses and technicians, he survived into legal adulthood — 900 percent life expectancy.

SMA is the narrative axis of Will Leitch's witty, vigorously written "How Lucky," whose 26-year-old narrator, Daniel, grapples with the limitations of Type 2, a milder form. An Illinois native, Daniel has followed his stoner-buddy best friend, Travis, to the college town of Athens, Ga., a haven for blissed-out hippies, alt-rock musicians, fraternity and sorority kids with Pepsodent smiles and throngs of SEC-football cultists. (In bold, brilliant strokes Leitch evokes the eccentricities of Athens, haunted in equal parts by the ghosts of R.E.M. and legendary coach Vince Dooley.)

Intelligent and irreverent, Daniel is employed as a customer-service representative for Spectrum Airlines. Shielded by a screen, he sponges up complaints from ticked-off passengers, a welcome relief from the glances of pity he notices when out in his wheelchair with his Pakistani nurse, Marjani. On social media, then, he creates a life that's otherwise denied him.

He's also determined to solve a mystery that grips Athens. Early in the fall, at the height of pigskin season, he observes through his porch window a young Chinese graduate student, Ai-Chin Liao, vanish into a Camaro driven by a White man with a distinctive ball cap. She speaks little English. Against a racially volatile background the town rallies to find Ai-Chin, posting fliers, holding vigils. Daniel seeks out police and others to tell his story, but as a disabled man who uses a Stephen Hawking-like device to speak, he can't seem to get anyone's attention.

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The puzzle of what happened to Ai-Chin — and Daniel's own role as both witness and voyeur — lends momentum to Leitch's plot (also a nod to Hitchcock's "Rear Window"). Daniel posts a query on Reddit; to his surprise, he's contacted by the driver of the Camaro, who claims that Ai-Chin came with him voluntarily. Or is this guy just some lonely dude, making it up? The theme of truth-telling — facts vs. fantasies, what can and cannot be said — propel "How Lucky."

Leitch draws his cast beautifully. Travis is as clueless as Travis in the film "Clueless," big-hearted and bumbling and girl-gaga, darting back and forth "like a goldfish with a head injury." The proficient Marjani intuits Daniel's needs better than he does himself, a trait common to nurses of SMA patients: "She always pushes me a little faster on Sundays, . . . putting me in clean underwear and whatever clothes she can find that will still hang on me, shoving eggs in my mouth, . . . hauling me back into the same chair she just found me in." And Daniel is a cheeky sleuth, twisting the soft bigotry of low expectations to his advantage, astute about how the rest of the world views his cohort: "We're their props. And there isn't much I hate more than being used as a prop."

Although able-bodied, Leitch has modeled Daniel on the son of a friend, vetting his character meticulously. And yet there's a nagging sense of one-degree-removed that mars his novel. Although SMA phenotypes vary widely, he gets a few crucial details wrong, or at best half-right, from the functions of the cough-assist to the disease's progression to a desultory mention of such transformative drugs as Spinraza. Occasionally Daniel veers into tutorials on the disease — one feels the hand of a sensitivity reader at work — but lapses stand out. Type 2 is not the most common form of SMA; that distinction belongs to Type 1. And it's unfathomable to me that Daniel and Marjani would break the rules of SMA 101 by heading to an outside gathering without the proper tools for a medical emergency.

Fortunately, "How Lucky" picks up the trail of its own meandering through-line as Daniel homes in on Ai-Chin's fate. Leitch flips the novel's opening sentence — "My life is not a thriller" — as the suspense kicks in. Daniel takes risks and pursues his instincts, all from the boxlike cockpit of a wheelchair. It's a tricky exercise when a writer steps outside his own personal experience to inhabit a character very different from himself; but "How Lucky" succeeds on more than just luck. With only a few missteps Leitch gives us an authentic, compelling portrait of a narrator who motors through the obstacle course of his life with grit and grace, a sprinkling of sex and a surfeit of curse words. Daniel may be locked in a physically atypical body, but he's just as human as the rest of us.

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How Lucky

By Will Leitch

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