

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

**Plastic by Scott Guild.**  
Vintage Books, Penguin Random House,  
New York, 2024.

*Review by Ed Meek*

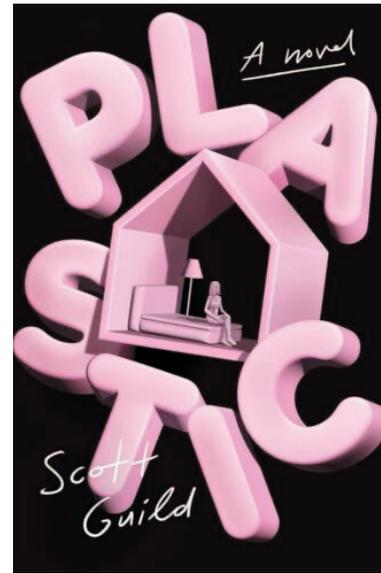
—*Life is plastic. It's fantastic. (Barbie Girl)*

The multi-talented Scott Guild has created both a novel and an accompanying musical version of the novel. The novel focuses on live plastic figurines existing sometime in the not-to-distant future after nuclear war. Guild is very inventive. He is adept at world-building and he presents us with a bizarro version of our current era of hyper-advertising, plastic everywhere and terrorist attacks. Yet, where we are talking about ways to try to diminish the role of plastic, in Guild's novel, the people are plastic. The main character, Erin, works at Tablet Town where she makes Smartbodies that enable the figurines to enter virtual worlds. Erin and the other figurines in the novel even have their own clipped, robotic language they use to converse.

The novel is told as if Erin is watching a movie: "The next scene opens on a slender kitchen." As the novel begins, we learn that Erin's boyfriend, Patrick, was murdered and that she is having a hard time dealing with it. The plastic figurines are routinely attacked by terrorists. Partly to escape her problems, Erin watches a show called *The Nuclear Family*, about a dysfunctional family that is blended with humans and waffles, parents who are always arguing and a son who is dealing with his feelings of homosexuality. The show has a laugh track which adds to its satirical tone.

Guild has an MFA from U of Texas at Austin and a PhD in English from U of Nebraska Lincoln. He worked on the novel and album over the course of ten years. The album has a new age sound to it and there is a music video. It can be found on Spotify. The combination of music and a compelling story seems like a natural fit for either an anime movie or a cartoon series. The novel is kind of a cross between "*Klara and the Sun*," the great novel by Ishiguro and *Barbie*, the movie. Like *Barbie*, the novel is insistent on making points. In *Barbie's* case about the patriarchy, in *Plastic* about our current problems with terrorism and the break-down of the family, and the way our language is devolving through texting. Here is an exchange between Erin and Jacob, a character she befriends: "You worry she listen at door?" "She prob not. But it small apartment. No want hurt her feeling." After a while, this language becomes stilted and annoying like the way native Americans talk in old Westerns.

It is also difficult to read an entire novel written in the present tense. In addition, song lyrics are sprinkled through the book. When we read song lyrics in a novel, we can either read them as poetry or fill in our own music. She (Erin) sings into the void: "The day I bought a VR suit/to lose



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myself in dreams, /To flee the sorrows of my youth/Behind a Smarthead screen." Maybe this is a good song, but as stand-alone lyrics, it is something one just skims over.

John Gardiner, the novelist, talks about creating a fictional dream. When a novel is effective, the reader gets lost in the dream. Formatting a novel as if it is a movie and then having the main character watch a tv show that functions as a satire, commenting on our world and hers, using stilted dialogue, puts the reader's focus on the artifice. Like Barbie, the novel is a great concept. It is very clever, but unlike, Klara and the Sun, we are never really drawn into the world of the characters. Characters who are plastic but somehow still have to eat food. Plastic characters who die. Does this make sense? These would not be issues in anime or cartoons and that I think would be the best format for Plastic.