Books

Review: *Upward Bound*

MFA graduate Woody Brown ’24SOA draws from some of his own experiences as a non-verbal autistic man for his debut novel.

By
Rebecca Shapiro
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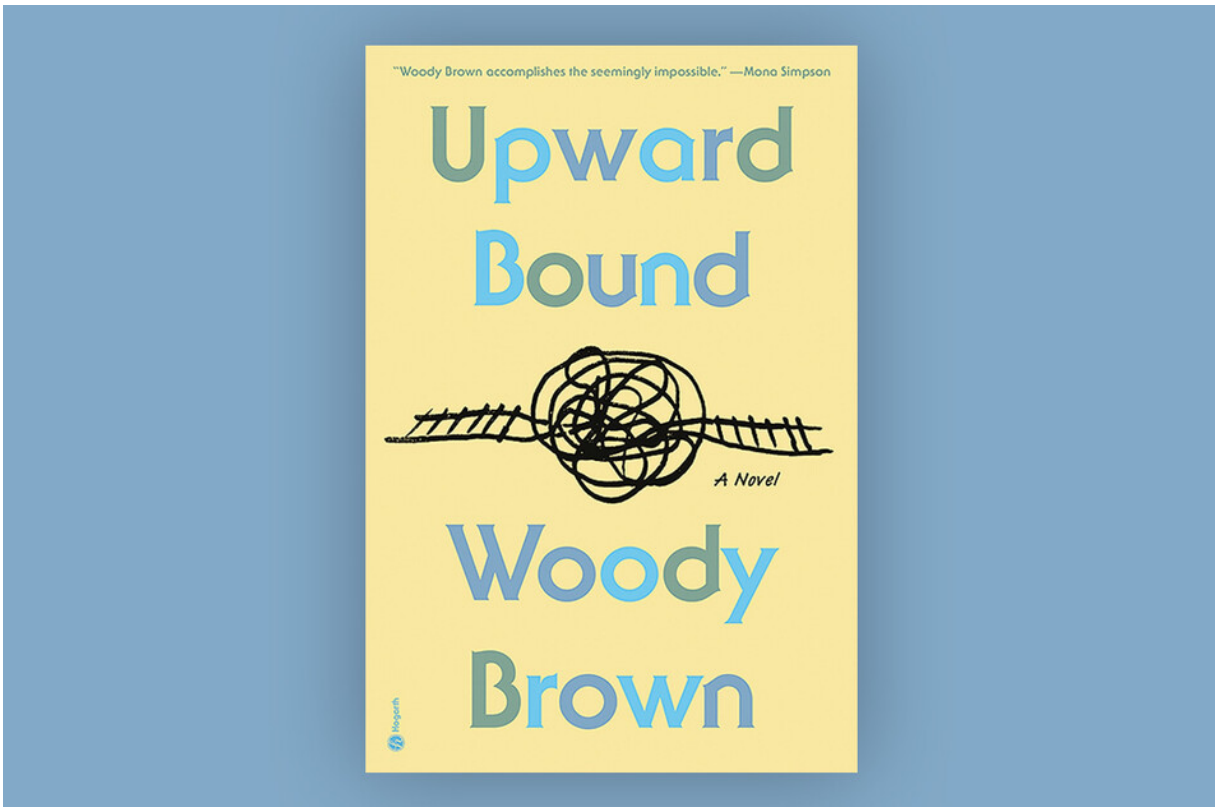

Hogarth

Time moves differently at Upward Bound, a Los Angeles day-care center for disabled adults. Walter — a self-described “inmate” there (the staff calls them “clients”) — rotates through a schedule of group activities meant for toddlers: crafts, snacks, visits to the playground. The goal, it seems, is just to fill those spaces, “as if time means nothing to people who have nothing but time.” Walter says the opposite

is actually true: “Our time is wasted so profligately that we cherish it for what it might be, not for its emptiness.”

But Walter *can’t* say that — at least not out loud — which is why he’s at Upward Bound. He’s severely autistic and nonverbal. Because he can’t talk, the world assumes that he can’t think. In fact, Walter is searingly intelligent. With communication assistance (his mother and a spelling board), he graduated with honors from high school and went on to community college, with the eventual goal of a bachelor’s degree. But when his father died, and his mother was forced to go back to work, that dream died too.

In addition to Walter, we get to know several of the other Upward Bound inmates. There’s Tom, whose movie-star looks are overshadowed by debilitating cerebral palsy, and Jorge, a gentle giant with the inconvenient habit of running away.

Debut novelist Woody Brown ’24SOA knows his material well. Like Walter and Jorge, he is autistic. But instead of spending his days at a place like Upward Bound, Brown earned his BA at UCLA (the first nonspeaking student ever to do so) and his MFA at Columbia. His ability to articulate the inner lives, the enormous frustrations, and the very real dreams of characters who are constantly underestimated by society is stunning and eye-opening.

But Brown is far more than a megaphone for the disabled community. He writes with enormous empathy from the perspectives of not just the Upward Bound inmates, but the staff members too. Being a human — any human — is complex and challenging and joyful and tragic in countless ways. And everyone, as Brown’s novel seems to scream, deserves a voice.

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