

FICTION

Being Dead Has Its Perks

Amie Barrodale's dazzlingly weird novel, "Trip," is about a mother and son adrift — in the afterlife and in the South Atlantic, respectively.

By Chelsea Leu

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TRIP, by Amie Barrodale

The events in "Trip," Amie Barrodale's first novel, unfurl so inexorably, and so casually, that the characters themselves hardly realize when their circumstances have become entirely unhinged. The title character, a 15-year-old boy with autism, escapes from a treatment center somewhere in the American Southwest and ends up in a car with a man named Anthony, who's hellbent on driving across the country to Florida, where a hurricane is fast approaching. Meanwhile, Trip's mother, Sandra, arrives in Nepal for a work conference about death and the afterlife. While there she slips on a hairbrush in her hotel bathroom, cracks her head on the counter and dies.

Trip

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This is just the beginning of a transcendent and dazzlingly weird novel about disconnection and difference. Being dead has its perks, particularly if you subscribe to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, as do many of the conference's participants (frequently and without warning, they spout dense mystical paragraphs from "The Tibetan Book of the Dead").

Sandra enters the bardo, the liminal state before reincarnation, with her consciousness intact. Initially, she doesn't even realize she's dead. In the bardo, you can go anywhere simply by thinking about it, and Sandra thinks mainly about Trip — intelligent, sensitive, obsessed with stargazing — whom she and her ex-husband deposited at the aforementioned "Center," against Sandra's better judgment, before she left for Nepal.

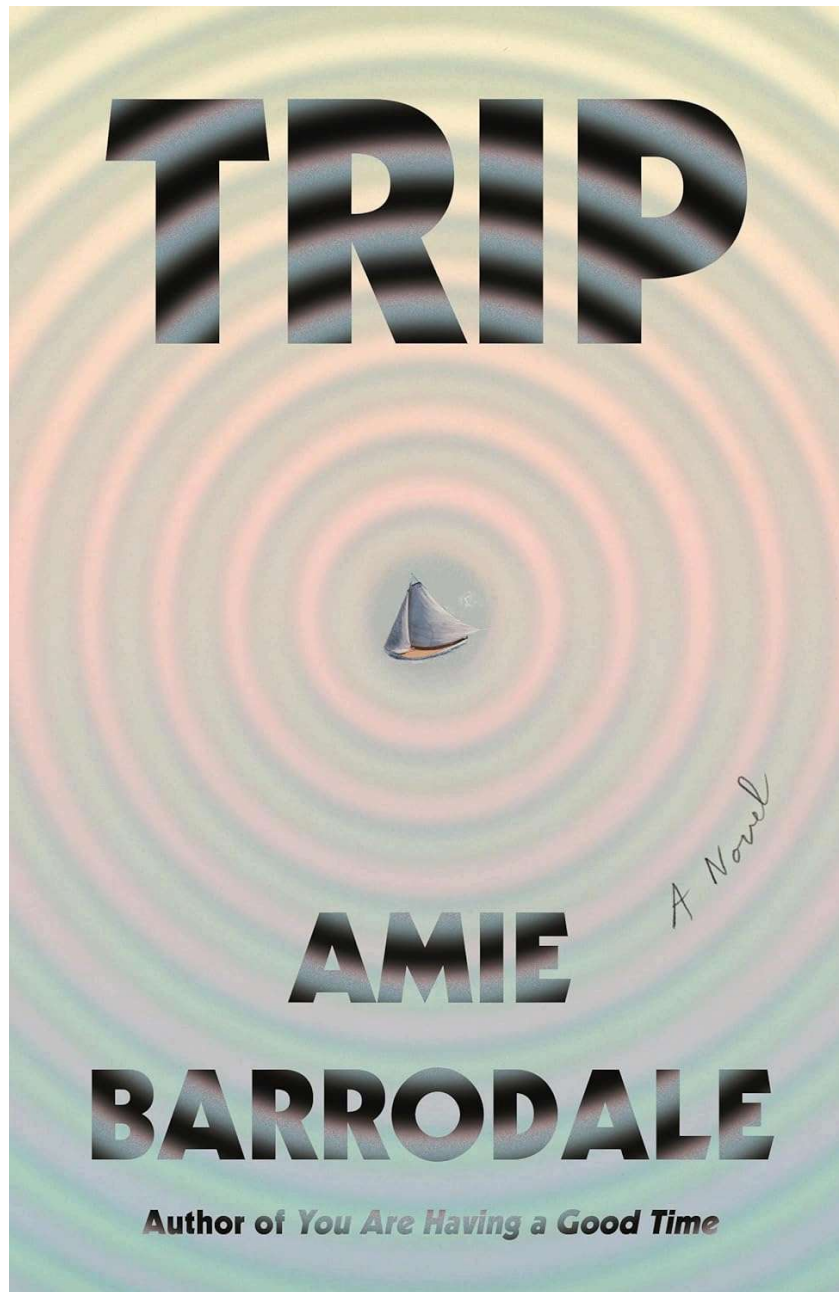
This relationship between mother and son forms the emotional core of the book, a steadying source of clarity amid the story's wilder details. Again and again, among a series of disjointed visions, Sandra returns to her memories of Trip's childhood: the first inklings of his autism, his diagnosis, the endless meetings with teachers and therapists and school administrators.

Beneath the otherworldly projections of bloated zombies and necrotic hands, the reader starts to sense that these memories constitute Sandra's unfinished business, attachments she must move beyond. They're suffused with her regret that she could have done more to help her son, and her helpless rage at the professionals who suggest that there's something wrong with him.

"The message was given that if Trip pointed with a different finger, it would be all right," Sandra thinks bitterly. "I was made to understand that my son needed to be a different person, and it was my job to change him."

Because Sandra is now a being unbound by the laws of physics, she's also the only one who discovers that the present-day Trip has ended up stranded on a sailboat with Anthony in the open ocean. Toggling between Sandra's and Trip's perspectives, the novel draws their journeys as parallel. Whether in the bardo or

the South Atlantic, both mother and son are adrift, trapped in between, separated from each other and nearly everyone else — an alienation that reverberates throughout the novel.



Both Sandra's and Trip's voyages are also, well, trippy. Anthony is a property manager and recovering addict who leads his teenage traveling companion from a mold-ridden beach house on the East Coast to a party at a mansion and finally out to sea in a stolen sailboat, monologuing all the while about his marital problems and his struggles with alcohol and heroin. The book's final act features a gloriously

ribald sequence in which Sandra attempts to save Trip by possessing a living person's body, along with the spirit of a Chinese travel agent who's turning into a crow and bent on one last hurrah of debauchery.

These dizzying, bizarre details are relayed in a matter-of-fact deadpan that leaves the reader never quite sure how to feel about what's happening. Even as I marveled at Barrodale's inventiveness, her gift for capturing the absurd specificity of an overheard Zoom meeting or texts from a dog-sitter, I couldn't shake off a quiet but persistent disorientation. I just don't get it, I would find myself thinking with some impatience, while reading yet another inexplicable scene.

And yet, by the end, my confusion and annoyance almost felt like the point. Perhaps there's something salutary about being thrown off-balance, the novel suggests. "How rigid, how conventional, how prescribed my expectations were," Sandra realizes at a pivotal moment, thinking about Trip. "How it shook us out of the characters we were playing, disrupted our zombie flow, when someone did something as simple as refuse to answer our questions."

In this light, the novel's strangeness comes to seem entirely intentional, and brilliant. "Trip" captures something of how it might feel to have your brain work differently from everyone else's, the loneliness and alienation of it. The story's inscrutable moments even take on a sort of beauty. Like Sandra, the reader is asked to let go of the pinched need to have it all make sense, all the time — to instead open our eyes and simply see what's there, in all its irreducible mystery.

TRIP | By Amie Barrodale | Farrar, Straus & Giroux | 290 pp. | \$28