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A.M. Homes traces the frightening (and hilarious) roots of GOP decay

Review by Ron Charles
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"The Unfolding," a sharp new satire by A.M. Homes, opens just after that national disaster that reshaped America in the early 21st century. The survivors are stunned, disbelieving, still surveying the damage while muttering, "This can't happen here."

That may sound like the shocked response to 9/11, but these are White Republicans in a Phoenix hotel reacting to the election of Barack Obama.

"The news has hit the room like death," Homes writes. "It's a rude awakening after hundreds of years and they're taking it hard. It's not just that Obama won, it's as though the founding fathers were assassinated. The truths they held self-evident have become a moving target." Their American Dream — the supremacy of White men and the sanctity of wealth — has suddenly shattered like a Tiffany lampshade.

"It's an official apocalypse," says a major GOP donor. "The world is going to hell and I am not pleased."

That patrician speaker — provoked to profanity by this calamity — is the protagonist of "The Unfolding." Homes refers to him only as the Big Guy. His net worth, like his nickname, is obscure but immense. He contributes enough to the Republican Party to be in the room when John McCain calls on Americans to congratulate and support their new president.

Such graciousness — not to mention political stability — now sounds like something from a different century. But for all his old-fashioned values, the Big Guy is ahead of his time. He's horrified by what McCain's loss and concession mean for the United States. "I'm shaken," he tells his wife. "I can't spend the next thirty years watching it all come undone."

Things are about to get a lot worse for the Big Guy. While he's focused on the collapse of his political party, "The Unfolding" also traces parallel tragedies ripping apart his personal life. Over many years of unhappiness, his ferociously thin wife, Charlotte, has restricted her diet to just two food groups: vermouth and maraschino cherries. "I forgot to have my life," she tells the Big Guy in one of several blistering conversations that Homes creates so well. At the Betty Ford Clinic, Charlotte wonders whether returning to their marriage is the way she wants to spend the next 30 years.

Even more dismaying for the Big Guy is the sudden awakening of his only child, Meghan. His greatest hope for the future, Meghan is a high school senior at a horsy boarding school in the Washington area and possibly the most ingenuous girl since Alice in Wonderland. She takes John McCain's loss in stride, but other more intimate disruptions make her realize that the world is not at all as her father described. "I'm not okay," Meghan cries at one disastrous Christmas gathering. "Everything I thought I knew is now a fake." (Fans of the author's 2007 memoir, "The Mistress's Daughter," will catch whiffs of autobiography floating through here.)

Homes captures the flora and fauna of America's aristocracy with exquisite precision. Her descriptions of these shiny people, so casual and friendly in their tightly choreographed habitats, reminded me of when I moved to Washington and noticed, as Meghan does, that "a lot of the women in the room and a few of the men look like they've had repair work done."

There can sometimes be a Franzenesque quality to Homes's family satire — a bitter skewering of parents' pathetic pomposity and melodrama. Charlotte's sardonic quips sound like fermented despair. And a scene describing the Big Guy conducting war games with toy soldiers of "the highest quality" on an old pool table leaves no survivors. But Homes retains a quality of resigned sympathy with these anxious, immensely self-important characters — a tincture of compassion that makes them feel all the more piteous.

Roused by Obama's victory, the Big Guy sits down at his desk and begins drawing a vast diagram of spheres of influence. "He's trying to figure out what he can build," Homes explains, "where the parts can act both synchronously and asynchronously without the workings being exposed, something operational and yet scrambled well enough so the identity of those pulling the strings can't be traced."

Jane Mayer and other journalists have exposed in alarming detail how the Koch brothers and their ilk have stealthily pulled the country to their private advantage. Homes is working in the same dark territory, but "The Unfolding" provides a different kind of insight into this privileged species — and a lot more comedy.

Much of “The Unfolding” skewers the Big Guy’s monomaniacal plans to drag the country back to its great White roots. His faith in the power of America is rivaled only by his faith in the power of a good memo. “What Comes Next?” he writes “in large letters across the middle of his desk blotter with a blue Paper Mate Flair felt-tip pen.” To answer that question he assembles a group of advisers who have “imagination, insight, and money to burn.” They include a “misinformation man,” an eccentric doctor, a mad general, a political historian, and a judge — wealthy, appallingly obnoxious men of a certain age who attended the right colleges. At their secret meetings — pampered bull sessions at fancy retreats — they make grand plans to assume control of the American body politic. The key is the V.I.S.I.O.N. thing: “Vital, Invisible, Succession, Insurance. Our (or octogenarian). Nation.”

The Big Guy calls his buddies the Forever Men and imagines they’re a modern-day reconstruction of a group that President Eisenhower appointed to keep America operating in the event of a debilitating national emergency. Along with some golf, their first priority is to design and bury a time capsule to carry knowledge of their existence 500 years into the future.

The dialogue in these cringingly hilarious scenes sparks off the page with such vibrancy that I felt as if I were in the room where it happened. As funny as it is, though, there’s an unsettling quality to the comedy in “The Unfolding.” The nefarious plot to retake control of America eventually coalesces around a 15-year plan to sow economic and political unrest, allow the country’s infrastructure to decay, and weaponize media platforms to divide the country “into the thinnest of pathological slices.” One of the Forever Men confidently predicts, “We will see the erosion of civil liberties and the rise of rogue non-politicians.” As this chaos unfolds, a desperate populace will turn with gratitude to men who can re-instill the old values of security and order.

It all sounds absurd — the fever dream of bored millionaires playing at nation-building — but here we are almost 15 years later contending with a political system just as broken as the one they hoped to precipitate. The party that once dined out on the elegant optimism of Ronald Reagan and the combative intelligence of William Buckley has been hijacked by a narcissistic carnival barker and his mob of conspiracy theorists, science deniers and Christo-fascists. “The Unfolding” suggests no solutions to this plight, but it offers irresistible reflection on how the audacity of hope got pushed off the rails and fell into the slough of despond.

Ron Charles *reviews books and writes the Book Club newsletter for The Washington Post. This is Charles’s last review for Style. Look for him in the new Book World section starting Sept. 25.*

The Unfolding

By A.M. Homes

Viking. 396 pp. $28

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