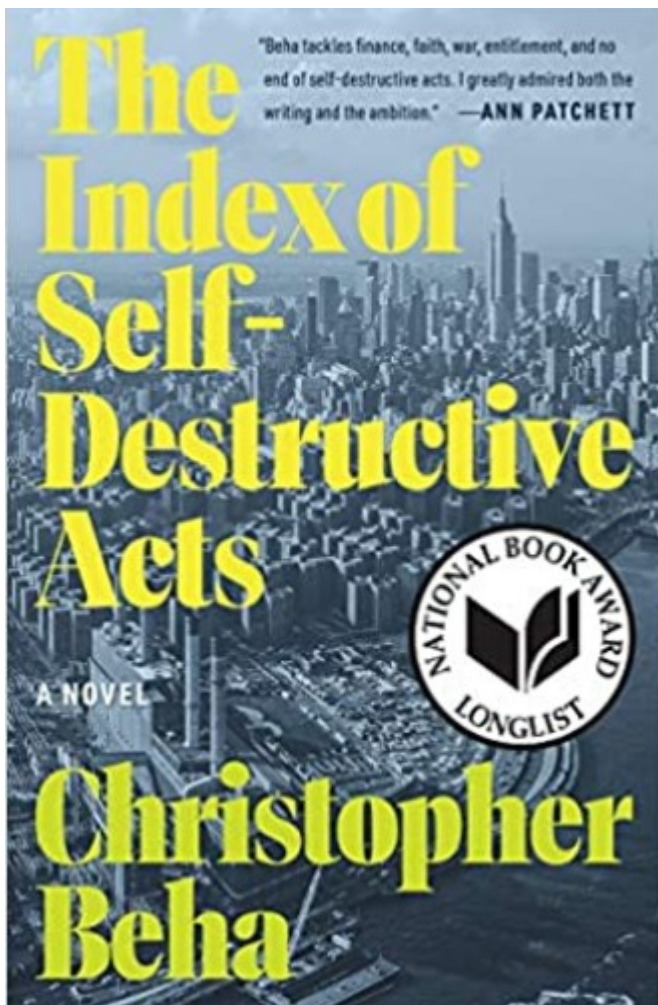


A novel about baseball, wealth, and human frailty

## **Christopher Beha's characters find themselves in pits, and the way out is not remotely clear.**

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **The Index of Self- Destructive Acts**

A Novel

By Christopher Beha

Tin House Books

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The index of self-destructive acts is a little-known baseball statistic that tracks how frequently a pitcher does something stupid—balking, pitching wildly, hitting the batter—through no one’s fault but his own.

But in Christopher Beha’s novel, the index is a metaphor for human frailty, striving, and failure. “It’s worse than a crime,” the antihero Sam Waxworth says at one point in an act of desperate self-preservation that is also self-destruction. “It’s a blunder.”

The novel centers on a New York City family, the Doyles. Frank Doyle is a famous columnist for a newspaper that most of the characters read obsessively. His notoriety comes from his cantankerous takes on politics and baseball, but when the novel opens he has just doomed his career by making an on-air racist joke about Barack Obama. He’s lost his job and pretends to be writing a book but instead watches baseball highlights on repeat.

Frank’s wife, Kit, is a successful financial analyst who has used her father’s money to make millions more. But the novel takes place just after the crash of 2008, and the family’s financial position is suddenly precarious, just as Kit has retired from the business.

Both of the Doyle children are lost souls. Margo left graduate school when her affair with a professor was revealed. She longs to write poetry, not study it. Eddie is an Iraq War vet who has returned with a sense of inner despair and outer confusion.

Each chapter of this expansive novel expresses a single character’s perspective on events, and three additional central characters are important to the plot’s unfolding. Justin Price is a young, successful trader who learned his job from Kit. As a Black man, he struggles with his success in relation to his family, who are deeply attached to their Brooklyn church and neighborhood. And last, but not least, Sam and Lucy Waxworth. Sam is a data phenom, in the model of Nate Silver, who has come to New York from Madison, Wisconsin, to write for a high-profile magazine. Lucy has reluctantly joined him.

The deeper stories that swirl around these characters have to do with the quasi-religious longings and feelings that are always present but never center stage. Eddie

becomes attached to a street preacher. Kit looks for consolation in the Catholicism of her childhood. Justin observes but can never fully connect with the community church that gives his parents' lives meaning. Lucy visits a psychic. The reader senses that spiritual impulses, in these different manifestations, are unrealized potentials in these characters' lives. Beha treats these potentials with a genuine, secular curiosity—like an outsider staring into the recesses of the human condition and wondering how it is made.

The answer seems to be that the human condition is made from sin. It isn't malicious so much as bumbling, not so much ill-intentioned (although there is plenty of selfishness to go around) as confused. It reminds me of the story that Julian of Norwich tells to explain the human condition in *Revelations of Divine Love*. One day Adam, the beloved servant of God, goes out into the world on an extremely important mission, falls into a ditch, and cannot get out. The characters in *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts* are in pits—some of their own making, and others that have been made for them—and the way out is not remotely clear.

Beha writes about this generously. He has compassion for his characters, but not too much compassion. He doesn't try to explain or justify their choices and behaviors so much as observe what happens when their conflicting motivations meet up. If there is any salvation in the novel, and it isn't clear that there is, it is found in various forms of doing time. Eddie puts in time as an EMT trainee. Other characters spend time in prison. Margo apprentices herself to poetry without guarantees of success. The version of salvation Beha leans on to create a distillate sense of hope is more like "Arbeit macht frei" than "Through grace you have been saved."

It might seem inappropriate to ascribe sin and salvation to Beha's intentions. He is writing about characters who inhabit a setting where religion can only appear as marginal. Still, his exploration makes religious questions seem almost inevitable. Why do we behave so badly? Why can't we seem to learn from our mistakes? What if anything can be done to help us? What value do our struggles for meaning have? Each character attempts a unique answer, and their answers do not offer final solutions so much as ongoing experiments.

The heart of the novel is debate, conversation, and the probing of life's meaning as an interpersonal activity. I've become a reluctant novel reader of late, not sure how much of my imagination and time I want to give over to fiction, and I've been more than willing to give up on novels if they fail to meet my expectations. This one hooked me through its dynamic conversations, and I read willingly and with

satisfaction to the end.