Foreword

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I first read *The Quality of Life Report* in August 2003, four months after its publication, and even then I remember thinking, *What took me so long? Why did no one pull me aside and tell me just how much I'd love this novel?* Specifically, why had my two close friends who'd already read it not conveyed a greater urgency? Because honestly, I felt as if Meghan Daum had written the book just for me. Of course, the mark of a truly special novel, and I believe *The Quality of Life Report* qualifies, is that many, many readers feel as if it was written just for them.

The funny thing is that a summary of *The Quality of Life Report* doesn't make it sound irresistible, or at least not like my version of irresistible: urbane Lucinda Trout, who is in her early thirties and works in the media, moves from New York to the fictitious midwestern town of Prairie City, where she finds (not necessarily in this order) love, cheaper housing prices, and wholesome locals. The tone is at times biting, even satirical. In some ways, Lucinda's views of herself and of life turn out to be right and in some ways they turn out to be wrong.

As it happens, I myself am a midwesterner who was born in Ohio and currently lives in Missouri after stretches spent on both coasts; I'm also familiar with the print version of the New York media world, having freelanced for twenty years for various publications. I offer these biographical details to illustrate the ways in which the premise of *The Quality of Life Report* might actually be off-putting to me—might seem tiresome or condescending or hit too close to home.

And in lesser hands, any number of things could have gone wrong. But Meghan Daum is incapable of tiresome writing. Whether it's her essays, newspaper columns, or fiction, she is always smart, always observant, always willing to push past clichés and truisms and engage deeply with the quirks and hypocrisies and charms of human behavior. She is brutally, wonderfully honest. And she is often extremely funny.

Thus, the execution of *The Quality of Life Report* is marvelous: every page, every *paragraph*, is insightful and witty, penetratingly intelligent, granularly textured. Daum's take on the Midwest is so nuanced that even though it's far from uncritical, it's still a kind of love letter, as such close observation always is. Her characters are like real people, and she treats them with the exasperation and compassion that real people warrant.

I clearly recall when I discovered Daum's work: it was 1997, I'd recently graduated from college, I was interning at a newspaper in Charlotte, North Carolina, and I was rapt while reading an essay she'd written for *The New Yorker* about the quasi-romantic emails she'd exchanged with a man online and the letdown of meeting him in real life. In fact, I admired that essay so much that—true story—I wrote her a fan letter I never sent. I also remember when I first read *The Quality of Life Report*: I was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I'd driven with my younger sister just prior to her starting a new job. I sat on my sister's roommate's living room couch, inhaling the book, amazed and delighted by it. Since 1997, Daum has been a writer I want to read regardless of topic.

In the years since my own first novel was published, in 2005, I've been asked often for book recommendations, and sometimes these recommendations run as lists on radio programs or in magazines. More than once, I've thought to myself, Have I exceeded the number of times I can legally recommend *The Quality of Life Report*? I hope not because I want to declare once more how terrific I think it is. I'm thrilled that it's being reissued, and I hope that it, and Daum, will find many new and enthusiastic readers.

The Quality of Life Report

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