

Hints of His Mortality

By David Borofka

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MORALITY

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A thematically unified and smartly arranged debut of 14 stories— one of those rare collections in which the sum is greater than its parts.

Borofka's mostly male protagonists approach midlife with a sense of having failed—not just at their professions, or as husbands and fathers, but as decent men. Sex plays no little part in their guilt: The narrator of the fine title piece, a 38-year-old “man without a conscience of his own,” realizes that, even though he's survived a plane crash, it does not absolve him of his sins, especially his recent adultery. When a minister's pass at his secretary is rejected, he accepts an unrelated staph infection as divine punishment (“The Whole Lump”). In “Prologue,” an unfaithful husband, a failed writer turned insurance salesman, finally confesses to his angry wife. Some of Borofka's stories document scenes from the lives of men struggling to understand the opposite sex: In “Reflected Music,” a college student begins to understand “the complications of intimacy”; in “The Summers of My Sex,” the narrator records scenes (unsexy ones) from his erotic development, many from summers spent with his mother's all-female family; and in “Sisters,” a narrator reflects on the women in his life: his wife and three daughters, the aunt who raised him, and the reckless mother who abandoned him. Borofka's moral vision includes matters of faith as well: Disillusioned ministers turn up in a number of stories. In “The Girl on the Highway,” a crisis of faith results from a young pastor's freak accident; in “Epilogue,” an Episcopal priest confesses his infidelity to his pragmatic brother. A typical liberal-secular couple in “The Children's Crusade” are bewildered by their daughter's religiosity after she's enrolled in a parochial school—a saintliness that's disrupted by her first period.

Borofka steers artfully and intelligently through a variety of collisions of faith and sex, creating a memorable work and an exceptional debut.