

Men Without a Clue

David Borofka's stories are filled with hapless failures who have wandering minds and roving hands.

HINTS OF HIS MORTALITY

By David Borofka.

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By Elizabeth Gaffney

A SMALL platoon of weak-kneed men — alcoholics and groppers but true-hearted nonetheless — straggles hopefully toward middle age in this impressive collection of stories by David Borofka. They are college teachers and Protestant preachers and other upwardly mobile types who find themselves suddenly out of work, doing stints as used-car salesmen to keep the rent money coming. They have failed to make the grade, both professionally and personally. They have wandering minds and roving hands.

Not surprisingly, their wives and

lovers have a few complaints: "Come on, jerkface . . . you got bills to pay. You owe us," threatens the wife of a man of the cloth who has just attempted suicide in the story "The Whole Lump." "You seedy little man," sneers the object of this same pastor's extracurricular affections, a buxom young fill-in for the hemorrhoid-plagued parish secretary.

"Men. You guys can't get anything right, can you?" asks the wife of another of these antiheroes, this one a divinity-school dropout and failed writer gone insurance rep. He more or less agrees with her: "I gave myself the excuse that if I couldn't save other people's lives or reinvent them, then I could at least help make them secure. But it was the hol-lowest sort of rationalization. I craved importance, but I sold insurance; I was unhappy, so I went to have my claims adjusted."

Story collections are often bound together by themes, by settings or by characters, but only infrequently does a book of short fiction have the sort of narrative power that rivals a swiftly plotted novel. What sets this volume apart from the horde is its uncanny mo-

mentum. Although the leading characters change, the stories are meticulously arranged to create a kind of continuity. After reading "Tabloid News," which concludes with the blissful if tenuous resurgence of Parker Thom's passion for his estranged wife, we turn the page and wake up with another couple, Janice and her husband, who are struggling with the decision to have a child. Thematically, this story follows the first one almost like a chapter in a novel, yet it delights us with a fresh set of details. And as story follows story, the book becomes a page-turner, relying in part on our compulsion to find out what might happen next and in part on our anticipation of each new variation on Mr. Borofka's basic male type.

The opening story, "The Blue Cloak," describes the marriage of Bobby Grimshaw and his wife, the dimwitted and sexually voracious Clair, her face as perfect "as marble and yet as bland and unremarkable as a white sauce." In subsequent stories, other characters intervene, but toward the end of the book we are surprised and pleased to return to the Grimshaws in the story

"Mid-Clair." Here we meet their pubescent daughter and look on with relish as Clair, the maligned beauty, learns to extract her husband's grudging respect — by constantly insulting him.

MANY of Mr. Borofka's couples remain childless, and the lives of those with children read like a laundry list of roads not taken by their barren brethren. Daughters team up with mothers against dysfunctional dads, others overzealously embrace their parents' religion. But the burdens of family life are always moderated by its joys. Grace, a persistent element in the stories, is twice described as having a tangible presence, even to the point of caroming "around the room with the velocity of hockey pucks" in the aftermath of a near-fatal choking episode. Such moments of giddy redemption leaven the woes of Mr. Borofka's characters, but the real miracle is the deftness, subtlety and humor with which he makes their many bedeviled lives cohere in a single vision of well-earned affirmation. □

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