

Hints of His Mortality

by David Borofka

reviewed in *Publishers Weekly*

October 7, 1996

HINTS OF HIS MORTALITY

David Borofka. Univ. of Iowa, \$22.95

(237p) ISBN 0-87745-557-0

The 14 stories in this accomplished collection, which won the 1996 Iowa Short Fiction Award, hurl themselves again and again against the same theme with nobly quixotic persistence. How, asks Borofka, do we console ourselves for our greatest disappointment—the failure of our lives, and ourselves, to rise to the level of our hopes and dreams? Using Wordsworth's famous "Ode, Intimations of Immortality" as epigraph and inspiration, Borofka is astonishingly good at sounding the depths of his characters' despair without ever becoming depressing, proving again that simply testifying to the struggle can be curative. The collection abounds with adulterous husbands, inadequate fathers and pastors with feet of clay all struggling to come to terms with their shortcomings. In "A Blessing," a husband finds his marriage strained when his wife suffers a miscarriage, bringing up unresolved memories from his own childhood. In "Reflected Music," a college student suffers an identity crisis after a breakup with his girlfriend and the advent of a mysterious new housemate. One especially rich character, whom we meet in both "The Blue Cloak" and "Mid-Clair," is Professor Grimshaw, miserable in a severely low-wattage academic career, and his beautiful, passive wife, Clair. Grimshaw "had joined himself to her precisely for her lack of complexity, recognizing that his own ego, shaky enough even when accorded center stage and top billing, would not tolerate the competition of sharing." However, Clair turns out to have unexpected powers of consolation and intuition, providing a much-needed moral compass when Grimshaw fails her. Borofka's writing is sometimes prissy and inert ("the dark hairs protruding from the mole waved in the air like the feelers of some sort of bug"), but the intensity of his stories is almost palpable. (Nov.)