

Art's Main Business

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

Pale Morning Dun: Stories, by Richard Dokey. University of Missouri Press, 2004.

Students of the late John Gardner often become so steeped in his ideas concerning the storyteller's craft, they overlook his remarks on invention. Wrote Gardner, "Invention, after all, is art's main business, and one of the great joys of every artist comes with making the outrageous acceptable."

Devotees of short fiction would do well, then, to take a look at Richard Dokey's most recent collection, *Pale Morning Dun*. They will find originality in abundance. In a Dokey story, invention never announces itself self-consciously. For one of the additional pleasures in this volume of 13 stories is the uncluttered prose, quietly bearing its humor and wisdom. Dokey's narrative style well serves his odd, ironic tales, moving them forward at a pace that is, curiously, both swift and unhurried. The terrain may be strange but also familiar, unsettling yet recognizable. Dokey consistently fulfills our hope of being drawn at once into that "fictional dream."

On any given page, the reader might find an insightful passage, built with enviable brevity and deceptive ease. A few examples:

A careful and precise man, [Belden] had not needed the admonition of a doctor to inform him that a human being was a ledger whose columns must be kept in balance. Addition and subtraction were the mathematics of life. As soon as he could understand, in childhood, the logic of abandonment, he had vowed not to permit anything so ludicrous as the world to shape the bottom line of his soul . . . ("A House In Order").

In the heart of Carsten Ulrich there was no place, over the years, to which he had not withdrawn. As others might seek

new lands, to find, in the journey, the mystery of themselves, he had narrowed all life's search to one small cubbyhole where, should the world grow haphazardly dark, he might yet find his way . . . ("The Mouse").

Then they noticed him, perched alone, with an empty glass in his hand, and grew embarrassed. He had never realized before how important it was to be someone's husband. . . . ("The Shopper").

The collection seems to comprise three loose categories: tales of mistaken judgment, modern fables, and coming-of-age stories. Dokey's narrators are men (and boys) in various states of yearning, alone if not lonely.

In the touching "Vital Statistics," an anonymous admirer contacts, by mail, the recently divorced narrator. The woman arranges for him to enjoy expensive dinners and nights at the opera, for no other reason than she might watch him, unseen. The amusing tale, "The Beggar of Union Square," will give readers pause the next time they encounter a panhandler. (Will this man rise up and walk to a trendy flat and reemerge dressed in Gucci loafers?)

Among the stories of childhood, "Suicide" opens with the standout line, "We all went down to the river to watch Jimmy drown." The grown narrator remembers his boyhood friend who thinks doing himself in will release his single mother from pain. The narrator has taken on the job of distracting his friend from his obsession.

Meanwhile, the aging narrator of "A House In Order" is a dealer in rare tapestries. Diagnosed with terminal cancer, John Belden strikes up an odd friendship with the dwarf deaf mute that runs the neighborhood newsstand and, in the end, assists the little man in an act of mercy that only a person in Belden's condition would consider.

Occasionally, Dokey's economy works against him. "Never Trust the Weatherman" is a Bluebeard tale, but we are inadequately prepared for its finale. Similarly, the opening story covers so much time and space we're left feeling we've just viewed a film on fast-forward.

On a more solemn note, death breathes through this collection as if it were an independent character. The title story, for example, chronicles two young fishermen, and brothers, who love to watch the mayfly nymphs emerge from their favorite stream. Only after his idyllic boyhood does the narrator become aware of the horrific events that took place in a nearby house. "Pale Morning Dun" balances beauty with the beast so effectively that we are left with a chill and an exquisite image—trout rising for the delicate winged insects that will live for only a day.

The people inhabiting these stories may be reclusive, even deluded, or remembering a fragile childhood. Sometimes monsters live in their midst. What lingers, however, is Dokey's imaginative handling of loss and death. The writing is so deft, one delights in its pairing with such an inventive mind.

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