

Acts of a Dubious Nature: A Collection of Short Stories

Tony Canino

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Refined and unpretentious, these short stories are directed by possibilities and filled with distinctive characters.

Tony Canino's collection *Acts of a Dubious Nature* comprises ten diverse and character-driven short stories. Ranging from stony realism to outlandish comedy, they cover eternal secrets, episodes of moral ambiguity, and a golf-related faux pas.

Most of the collection focuses on occasions where people carry out heinous, unpleasant, or unusual deeds. Such moments suggest that every person has some act of which they alone are capable. This idea is studied with a sense of open possibility, resulting in distinct and engaging vignettes.

Under the changing surface of its stories, *Acts of a Dubious Nature* carries a persistent sense of style which is best seen in the way that its characters express themselves. Every personality is illustrated by way of a particular flavor of snappy and satisfying dialogue or narration. Wit and liveliness pervade even those stories which are gloomier in tone, occasionally to the point of dissonance. "Inappropriate Touching," the chronicle of a professional boxer headed toward a grudge match, is perhaps the best display of what this style can do, leveraging colorful, mouthy characters to build an emotional conflict that whirls around the central fighter. But the same approach runs away with itself in other tales, including with the raucous, motley crew that populates "The Ancient Mariner Goes Home." When a former Nazi's cremated remains go to sea with this group of unlikely stand-ins, dignity is abandoned; the ensuing quips and banter are more grating than clever.

The book's language is refined and unpretentious, though making ready use of semicolons. In construction, the tales trend formulaic: people emerge from an uncertain context bearing a few personality quirks, a clear motive, and just enough momentum to arrive at a twist, a revelation, or some form of an existential punch line. But this safe approach works to the stories' advantage, complementing their attentive descriptions with a sense of drama.

The book includes some standout moments, as with "The Way to a Woman's Heart," a tale framed by the comings and goings of an extraterrestrial being in the life of a small-town man, Duane. The alien qualifies for the "other" category at the town's livestock show, and the zaniness doubles before the story's graceful landing back where it started, with the world unchanged despite the nutty schemes and martian hell-raising. Also notable is "A Man in a Hurry," which, without fluff, enumerates the final concerns of a man who's skydiving with two broken parachutes.

The short stories collected in *Acts of a Dubious Nature* involve moments of ingenuity and reflect a variety of tones.

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