

American Grief in Four Stages

Sadie Hoagland

West Virginia University Press (Nov 1, 2019)

Softcover \$18.99 (168pp)

978-1-949199-21-5

In fifteen stories that mine different forms of torment, Sadie Hoagland gathers lost innocence, altered lives, and harsh memories—sometimes with elegiac, bald realism, and sometimes with eerie hyperbole and gruesome images.

“Father/Writer” details a couple’s fear of the harm that could befall their daughter from infancy through her teen years. “American Grief in Four Stages” sees those fears realized, as a girl tries to forget her sister’s murder. A story set after a brother’s suicide features his sibling’s clever evasion. In “Extra Patriotic,” a troubled veteran meets a woman who’s plagued by her parents’ murder-suicide. Dark as they are, such forays are plausible, revealing the confusion that violence leaves in its wake.

A few stories, including “In July Flags are Everywhere,” take on fable-like contours. Here, a daughter watches her parents regress into childlike states after an unspecified war claims the family’s elders. Between steaks wrapped in American flags and the soldiers who present them as mementos, the story makes the disorienting nature of receiving bad news ever more present. In other stories, mental illness—seen through the eyes of those it claims, including a six-year-old schizophrenic—reveals pain from a distance.

On occasion, narrators relish in visceral details, such as an eye that’s removed, and voices are amplified by emotional bruises and shocks. Whether the plot hinges on large trauma or a “microbattle,” subtle tenderness ends up searing the readership. The book’s standout, “Frog Prince,” is a fragmented story that alternates a young narrator’s sexual assault with her response to a gay friend’s suicide. It’s a thoughtful look at friendship and failure whose finale arrives through well-timed pressures.

This terrifying, brave collection takes the sting out of what happens when the worst has already occurred. Even in their loss, its broken characters find ways to try and explain the unexplainable to themselves.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2019)

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