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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ SHORT STORIES

An Eye for a Tooth: Five Short Stories About Justice

Gordon Planedin
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The Bible prescribes “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” as compensation for an injustice, but Gordon Planedin writes about situations that he believes call for more violent solutions. In *An Eye for a Tooth*, he offers five tales of vigilante justice in which the punishment fits the crime in some unexpected ways.

Clearly offended by a judicial system he perceives as inadequate, Planedin explores scenarios in which the average citizen might be his own best law-enforcement officer. In his first story, “Maggie’s Turn,” for instance, a violent drug dealer thinks he has pulled off another con until one of his victims targets him in a sting operation that brings her satisfaction on many levels.

Each short story in the collection gets right to the point without skimping on the details of the inevitable confrontations. Planedin is comfortable with the language of firearms, noting shotgun gauges and revolver calibers with the ease of Dirty Harry talking about his friends Smith and Wesson. In fact, Planedin’s citizen cops borrow some of the Detective Callahan bravado as they explore the power in being the one holding the weapon. It “took only one look at the twin gaping barrels of eternity facing them to inspire the utmost, immediate cooperation,” Planedin writes.

Planedin’s wide range of character types shows how everyone from high school girls to nursing home residents can stand up for themselves against the world’s bullies. In his stories, the criminals never meet an easy end, and some of the author’s descriptions—crushed windpipes and gaping wounds among them—are remarkably graphic. Their impact would be greater, however, if spelling errors, apparent typos, and run-on sentences didn’t distract from the flow of the story.

The final story recaps the overarching theme of Planedin’s tales: individuals can find personal redemption in making things right. In “Old Arthur,” he tells the story of a 65-year-old man looking back on his life and wishing he had done things differently. As he contemplates the wilderness of his own soul, he walks through a remote forest and happens upon the hideout of one of society’s most reprehensible criminals, a kidnapper who has abducted a young girl. Arthur’s clever use of force and psychology may not only save young Maxine, but also prevent future abductions. In acting decisively, Arthur tries to make a difference in the world.

With *An Eye for a Tooth*, Planedin transforms his obvious frustration with the limits of the American justice system into a call to action. In condoning the use of violence to exact justice, it is a call that is certain to be controversial. A bright red cover featuring an unusual take on the scales of justice matches the book’s angry content.
SHEILA M. TRASK (September 21, 2012)

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