

## Ashes Rain Down: A Story Cycle

**William Luvaas**

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*Ashes Rain Down* is a collection of linked short stories set in a dismal, pre-apocalyptic world where environmental disasters wreak havoc on disparate communities scattered across the country. The world is embroiled in The Forever War, which, as the name suggests, is a never-ending global conflict that continues to break down the societal structures that hold fragile communities intact. The stories follow a motley collection of characters residing in Sluggards Creek, a town that serves as a microcosm of the world at large. This is a community on the brink of collapse—a waning food supply, no electricity, limited gas, and increasingly violent civil unrest have pushed people to the very edge of human tolerance.

Yet, against this depressing backdrop, Luvaas manages to inject every story with a sense of buoyancy. The collection is strangely uplifting despite the operatic landscape of desolation that pervades every aspect of these characters' lives. In the title story, readers meet Lawr Connery, an affable and surprisingly poetic man who is intent on believing in the goodness of the human spirit though he knows the world is very quickly careening toward an end. The writing style is poetic but also refreshingly crisp. The opening lines for example, carry the reader into the story on a rhythm: "Ashes rain down from the sky, or fall in a steady blizzard, rather, drifting slowly down, some tiny, some the size of oak leaves, individuated as snowflakes." The language is precise and purposeful, nothing wasted.

Some stories echo elements of magic realism, layering the collection with an unsettling, almost cathartic, energy. For example, in "Fly Bitten," Lawr wages a battle against an infestation of hatred that has spread throughout the town. He uses the power of "good thoughts" to drive hordes of plague-ridden flies away and opens the town to a wave of goodness that carries them forward. In this collection, Luvaas accomplishes an important feat: He creates characters that serve as comical beacons of optimism. They share moments of real human insight that are neither preachy nor didactic. Rather, they are simple and true. Rough and stalwart, the recurring characters rise up under impossible conditions and simply carry on.

Characters face isolation and misery, but Luvaas maintains a masterful balance in tone, resulting in lighthearted devastation. In "Fever," he writes, "So the sickness passes over and we wonder what's next. Devastating rains, then drought, economic collapse, poverty and despair, disease and attempted suicide. Tia suggests we throw a survival party." Luvaas's ability to sieve a realistic sense of hope and optimism from grievous circumstances is perhaps the heart of this collection. Futuristic and hopeful, *Ashes Rain Down* would be a welcome addition to the dystopian lover's reading list this season.

SHOILEE KHAN (Spring 2013)

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