

★ Big Bad

Whitney Collins

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Whitney Collins's layered short story collection *Big Bad* concerns the dark impulses that lurk within.

In the ingenious cautionary tale "Big Bad," a woman gives birth to progressively wiser iterations of herself. In the atmospheric noir story "Drawers," brooding images evoke the melancholy of a recent widower; these are juxtaposed with the oddity of his hitting a horse during his reluctant drive to attend his grandson's circumcision party. In "Sunday," a teenage girl assumes a cynical attitude before deciding that her estranged father's often criticized naïve optimism feels more fitting.

Hints of sexual frustration, prolonged heartache, and repressed emotion run throughout. They are seen in a teenage boy's sexual awakening at summer camp; in a couple's efforts to revive their marriage, which has gone sour; when a bully is haunted by his failure to be one of the good guys; and in a repairman who succumbs to a seedy hookup, comforted by the illusion of something nobler.

Playful titles that are imbued with double meanings are followed by startling openings that prompt questions from the audience. These lay the groundwork for clever metaphors, which in turn foster deeper insights. Elements of magical realism result in refreshing and hilarious angles on human foibles. Precise details help to convey the stories' amusing, lingering themes.

Collins's quirky characters wrestle with secret desires; they make irrational decisions that have long-lasting repercussions. Some entries highlight the moments that awaken fantasies and shatter illusions. Others center on characters' struggles with hope and cynicism, illusions and realities. Some of Collins's characters are inclined to nurse imaginary problems until they become real ones.

Not a word is wasted in *Big Bad*, an unusual and masterful collection of short stories.

WENDY HINMAN (March / April 2021)

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