

Book Tales

David G. Hallman

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Atmospheric style and intimate characterizations make these rich stories well worth reading to the bittersweet end.

Book Tales, a collection of short stories by David G. Hallman, explores literature and sexuality as dual forces in the construction of a person's experience and identity. The book's seven tales blend fiction, historical fact, and literary biography to probe the intersections of literature, sexuality, and identity for a variety of male protagonists. Often explicitly erotic and always well-written, these stories explore the connection between life and art, from haunted artists to the stories that haunt us.

Hallman's use of books as a recurring theme is always evident, although his references to extant literature play greater or lesser roles depending on the story. Tales like "About Time" and "Strong Like Tessa" feature characters who interact with a specific work of fiction, with the referenced book serving as the catalyst for each character's arc. Stories like "Tangier Tryst" and "La Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève" feature books that work as foil or foreshadowing for characters as they go about the business of love and life.

Most of the stories are fiction, but other stories in the collection rely heavily on historical facts about gay writers. One story, "Morgan and Maurice," stands out as an almost straightforward biographical sketch. Fascinating information about E. M. Forster's life, writing career, and sexual identity is presented, but the story concludes with an awkward fictional conversation between Forster and Maurice, the subject of Forster's novel of the same name.

In "*Fifth Business Fiction*" and "Faggots and Faith," departures into the history of gay artists' sexuality and identity are beautifully woven into the narrative. The result is a sense of resonance and depth, with the true lives of historical gay artists mirrored in their art; that art, in turn, is held up as a mirror to the characters in Hallman's tales.

The cover design suggests an intense psychological thriller, which the work is not. Instead, the collection is one of deft eroticism. Hallman doesn't just pay lip service to the notion that love and sex are a foundational part of the human experience—he revels in it. His frank engagement with his characters' sexuality is explicit, but never gratuitous. By exploring this often taboo topic, Hallman honors the full spectrum of his characters' experiences, and makes a compelling case for just how important sex is in shaping identity and in anchoring people in their own humanity.

The short stories in *Book Tales* are diverse and riveting. Hallman honors the lives of those who create art as much as the lives of those who consume it. By illuminating the intertwined struggles of sexuality, identity, love, and loss, this collection's atmospheric style and intimate characterization create seven rich worlds well worth reading to the bittersweet end.

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