

Darker with the Lights On

David Hayden

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From ambiguousness to garish nightmares, David Hayden gleans incidents from the lives of characters standing at the abyss. *Darker with the Lights On* tunes in to a fascinating, eerie frequency and is surprising at every turn.

These visceral stories test the line between the grotesque and the cunning with their clinical portrayals of troubled characters. A man whose wife is gone spends his days considering objects. A corpse decomposes on a table while dinner guests treat the gruesome tableau as a matter of course. An abusive man narrates his story after having been murdered. Another man falls from a building, setting the stage for an experiment in suspended time. Despite their foreboding, these stories are otherworldly rather than shocking—a mark of their careful, calibrated style.

With minimal background on the characters, what matters is the particular encounter which, once it has passed, leaves further aftershocks in its wake. The effect is jarring and startling, a risk that takes themes of isolation, memory, and loss and turns them into questions with few answers. Amid the strangeness, everything familiar strikes a deep chord. As difficult as some of these characters are, their wishes to be heard ring above their circumstances.

Many of the stories relish in theatrics. They're often set in claustrophobic surroundings that unfold in fecund descriptions. They focus on distinct scenes. Sometimes—as in the haunting “Elsewhere”—they convey a powerful sense that tragedy has taken place just off stage.

Less brutal stories provide respite from the violence while still displaying an impressive range. These include flash fiction that considers the moment just after an outing at the theater, an allegory in which a man seeks nourishment in a library, and a tall tale on the plight of miners who can't stop crying.

Darker with the Lights On is a rich, demanding collection whose stories illuminate dark corridors where what's visible is more frightening than what can only be imagined.

KAREN RIGBY (May/June 2018)

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