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Different Voices: A Different Voice and Other Stories

Walter Febick
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Different Voices, Walter Febrick's novella, is a California dream—the kind of dream that you wake up from, urgent to tell someone what happened, say "…and then…," and fall back asleep till you've dreamed the next thread of the narrative. It is a sequence of episodes and encounters between Dale, a seventeen-year-old drifter, and the men he meets on his trip to California. First he travels and parties with a man named Harold, who gets him to the mythical town of Ocean City and promptly dies. "Somehow it all made perfect sense. As if watching television with two lonely dogs and a dead man was as good a way as any to spend a quiet evening at home."

Soon he is picked up by Brian, who takes him to a crumbling Mediterranean villa on the shore. Brian lives there with Martin, an older man. They spar and drink and couple and swim until key facts are revealed, and then Dale drifts off again. The plot structure is not unlike Catcher in the Rye, but Dale is much less fully realized than Holden Caulfield. It's not really Dale's story. It's about everybody else.

The heavy-limbed, dreamlike texture of this story is partially attributable to Dale's lackadaisical perspective, and partially to the random order in which Febrick reveals very important facts. Dale's name, his age, Brian's, Martin's marital situation and ultimately his HIV-positive status are dropped into the plot midway, after the reader has developed his own impressions of the characters.

Many of the short stories in the second half of the book are funny explorations of gay life. "Interactive," a science fiction spoof, introduces readers to Kyle the Virtual Stud; "The Last Seduction of Amy" shows how soap (opera) is made; and "Stonewall's Children" has loud brassy riffs of bar talk. Febrick's strength is in his dialogue and his close observation of the urban landscape. In contrast to his California reverie, his New York stories are tight and bright.

LAURENE SORENSEN (April 15, 1999)

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