

Elvis's Dog...Moonbeam and Other Stories

Robert Moulthrop

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Moulthrop's stories showcase his command of rhythm in prose and dialogue as they show the inner life of his characters.

In an eclectic collection of twelve short stories, Robert Moulthrop explores family, relationships, and ennui through the unique voices of a range of characters. *Elvis's Dog...Moonbeam and Other Stories* offers a variety of tales with subtle, understated action. Moulthrop lets the stories unfold through the emotional lives of his characters.

The collection features a wide array of styles, some more experimental than others, including one story, "The Dire Case of the Skulking E-Mail," where the author inserts himself into the narrative and addresses the reader. Others are more straightforward, including the poignant "Miss Honeybunch Takes a Dip," in which a self-centered high-school girl attempts to control her boyfriend's friendship with an outcast "fairy" named Frankie in the 1950s. Most of the stories are relatively short, following the thread of a single character in contained scenes. The stories' order does not seem to follow any particular pattern; experimental stories are interspersed with straightforward ones, with no obvious progression in time or style.

Moulthrop brings most of his stories through a complete arc, and some of the strongest end with a sharp, focused image that leaves a lasting impression. For example, in "Miss Honeybunch Takes a Dip," Moulthrop takes care to show young Rosellen's perspective on Buddy (her boyfriend) and Frankie, while also highlighting moments of Rosellen's selfishness in order to illustrate the impact her actions have on those around her—such as when she all but demands Frankie go get a Coke for her and Buddy, so they will not have to be seen talking to him. The story builds up to a final, vivid moment that neatly brings to light the truth behind the relationships in the narrative.

At times, the book relies so much on the inner emotions of its characters that the action becomes secondary and the plots somewhat thin. For example, in "Hinges," Anne deals with her father's illness and tries to get in touch with her brother. The story is reflective and quiet, and though Anne's brother does eventually appear, any conflict and resolution remains interior. This internal focus occasionally makes it hard to find footing in the stories.

All of Moulthrop's stories showcase his command of rhythm in prose and dialogue, such as in "Peru, with a Tinge of Ice," when the main character, Sweeney, and his ex-girlfriend Lisa discuss her potential book sales in South America. When Sweeney suggests they all (his wife and daughter included) move to Peru, the conversation captures Sweeney's paralysis within his own life as he flails to find something, anything, that might draw him out of it.

Elvis's Dog...Moonbeam and Other Stories would appeal to readers of literary fiction who are interested in subtle, quiet stories whose arcs reflect characters' interior lives more than external progressions in plot. The diverse collection offers stories that will likely each interest a different audience.

STEPHANIE BUCKLIN (May 5, 2015)

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