

★ **Farthest South: Stories**

Ethan Rutherford

A Strange Object (Apr 13, 2021)

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Ethan Rutherford's *Farthest South* is a spooky, sweet, wondrous short story collection.

Rutherford's stories possess undeniable darkness, and his collection maintains suspense throughout. But the thread that connects the stories is not scary, bleak, or supernatural—it's the presence and importance of family.

The first and last stories exemplify the book's themes and delivery; both feature Soren, a young father, who narrates bedtime tales for his children. He relates gripping accounts featuring a horrid "Seal Lady," a magic fish, a diver whose body parts detach and reattach, and the diver's nemesis, an evil giant squid. Soren's stories are inventive and satisfying in and of themselves; just as enjoyable, and perhaps more telling, are descriptions and dialogue from the real world, as Soren answers questions from his boys and interacts with his wife. There's something larger at work in every story, and the fact that the entries rarely offer neat resolutions only makes them more haunting and beautiful.

Other stories tell of a baby with gills; a man whose Antarctic voyage is accompanied by a talking penguin; and a pair of foxes who adopt a human child, also shared in a story-within-a-story narrative style that's used to haunting effect.

Rutherford's writing cuts to what's essential. His sentences are lean, but speak volumes nonetheless: a hospital has walls with "comforting paintings, fat ships in calm seas." Later, in a showcase of the book's ability to tantalize, two jittery boys on a boat look behind to see only "their own flat wake licking eerily away from them." There's variety in the subject matter, but also in style, while occasional black-and-white illustrations add to the enjoyment.

Farthest South is an imaginative, transformative, and delightful short story collection.

PETER DABBENE (March / April 2021)

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