

★ Instructions for the Drowning

Steven Heighton

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In Steven Heighton's masterful posthumously published story collection *Instructions for the Drowning*, men's psyches are on display.

These layered and intricate stories balloon out their denouements until they are taut. "Instructions for Drowning" focuses on the excruciating moment in which a man tries to rescue his drowning wife. In "Repeat to Failure," a man ruminates about the freakishness of death as he gasps beneath a fallen weight bar in the gym. And in "You're Going to Live," a prison officer walks a fine line between duty and hate as he stops a prisoner from gagging himself.

Suicide is a dominant theme. In "Notes Towards A Theory of Tears," a doctor suffers second-hand PTSD from treating Canadian soldiers who were sent to Afghanistan; he attempts multiple suicides. Underlying menace creeps within an aged, privileged plastic surgeon's mind in "Professions of Love" as he remakes his wife's face without her permission. And in "Everything Turns Away," a man test-driving a car happens upon a suicide and attends to the unknown man's funeral; death creates intimacy with a stranger even as it estranges him from himself.

Often in these tales, ostensibly throwaway details illuminate people's interior lives. There are luminous and compassionate reveals: of a gay man who's dying of HIV and who refuses a lap blanket because he is not yet old; of a Muslim man on a Greek island whom no woman would marry because his hands have buried too many Syrian refugees.

The Joycean stories collected in *Instructions for the Drowning* are searing reminders: that the other side of rage is a vale of tears; and that people lie to themselves to avoid facing "the world naked," not knowing how to save themselves, even when a helping hand is extended.

ELAINE CHIEW (March / April 2023)

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