

Ira Foxglove

Thomas McMahon

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Ira Foxglove is a fixer. He can repair a car engine in the wild with few tools. He can tinker with an uncooperative motorbike and get it running. His biggest challenge, however, is to fix his marriage and restore his family to normality—if he can.

This novel, the author's fourth, published posthumously, is a journey, as Foxglove seeks out his estranged wife Portia, who has left America for London to realize her dream of being a competitive swimmer.

Comfortable and adept in the world of science and all things mechanical, Foxglove, an inventor, is challenged with the more perplexing and inexact science of human relationships. The character likely mirrors aspects of the author, who was a professor of biology and applied mechanics at Harvard University and founder of the modern science of biomechanics, when he died at age fifty-five in 1999. This novel takes the reader through a maze of self-discovery as Foxglove tries to connect with people. His abilities open doors for him, as people are drawn to equanimity and his distinctive way of solving problems.

In Foxglove's quest to find his wife, he hitches a ride on a blimp piloted by his friend Neptune, who is embarking on a transatlantic flight. During a layover in Iceland, they take a field trip by Volkswagen to the remote countryside, where Neptune's car fails. Foxglove calmly fixes it, minimizing his accomplishment, much to Neptune's annoyance. "It was a big thing," Neptune said. "We were stuck here, and you knew what was the matter and fixed it. There aren't many people who can depend on themselves like that."

At times, however, Foxglove's empirical disconnect affects even himself. Having a serious heart ailment that may require major surgery, Foxglove starts to draw up a plan for an artificial heart for himself. Yet, even as his life is on the line, he approaches the whole subject—his life—as part of an interesting experiment, and the reader is unsure if he is truly flustered by the situation. McMahon effectively brings the reader into this analytical thought process.

The novel offers a unique cerebral glimpse into the working mind of a scientist, a feat accomplished, in part, by the author's extensive academic background. Foxglove's best weapon here is his mind, as he tries to preserve a life that is in danger of evaporating. Foxglove's other weapon, perhaps a hint of the ultimate outcome for his malady, lies in the power of his own name. It is the foxglove plant, after all, that contains ingredients used in digitalis, a beneficial cardiac medicine.

KARL KUNKEL (January / February 2004)

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