ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

Like Loving Backward
Cheo Tyehimba
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Like Loving Backwards is a collection of seven short stories by Cheo Tyehimba a successful journalist who has written for magazines including *Time Entertainment Weekly People* and *Oprah*. His stories are written in the tradition of folklorist Zora Neale Hurston grounded in the everyday but unearthing the magic hidden within the mundane. There is the garlic farmer who hears voices of the dead a boy with magical hair who gets his first haircut and a long-lost father who turns up only to disappear into a tree.

In many of Tyehimba's stories birds appear in scenes of narrative importance. Noting nearby egrets the father in "Water was Drunk" says "Boys I want you to always respect birds. They carrin' the world on their wings" before he tips over the boat and drowns one of his sons.

Tyehimba's slips into the supernatural world are well executed and never jarring. In "The Process" a story about a young father's anxiety over his son's first haircut angry cops burst into a North Philadelphia barbershop and assault innocent patrons. In the wake of this abuse the son's cut hair takes on magical powers as it floats around the room never landing on the floor and evading the grasp of the astonished barber. In the collection's title story a boyfriend tries to make amends with his girlfriend by reuniting her with her homeless father. The father is delusional and conniving but he ultimately speaks the truth about his daughter's relationship in a rare moment of clarify before inexplicably disappearing into a nearby redwood tree.

Centered on experiences in African American communities and told mostly from the male character's perspective Tyehimba's stories explore the complexity in relationships whether between friends husband and wife or father and son. One story "Next Exit: Los Baños" is written from a mother's perspective as she learns of her son's fatal car crash. Yet Tyehimba gives the dead son a voice as the mother thinks she hears her son's innermost thoughts on the iPod he left behind.

The stories in *Like Loving Backwards* are a pleasure to read because Tyehimba writes the way people talk. His ear for dialogue is matched by his skillful descriptions of characters; he conjures them up with visuals like "ironing board shoulders." And ultimately Tyehimba is able to rescue the African American male from stereotype by giving depth and sensitivity to

experiences that are otherwise noted as merely statistics like boys abandoned by their fathers and an unjust police force. The author also paints vivid images of his stories' backdrops from a North Philadelphia barbershop to the BART San Francisco's public transit train. His stories convey a sense of community while underscoring the plight of his characters who must navigate through a world that is so much larger than the self.