ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

Mike Tyson Slept Here
Chris Huntington
Boaz
978-1-893448-10-0
(May 2011)

It's no surprise that *Mike Tyson Slept Here* won the Fabri Literary Prize. It's also no surprise that Chris Huntington earned his MFA from Bennington College or worked for the Indiana prison system for almost ten years—he's done his time, and as a result, *Mike Tyson* is a small, deft novel, each detail fresh and infused with truthfulness.

Brant Gilmour, a feckless twenty-two-year-old fresh out of Indiana University, takes a job "teaching GED classes at the prison Mike Tyson made famous." Idealistic but callow, Brant is out of his depth. He's intimidated by the inmates, not prepared for "all the people around me, of all the khaki uniforms standing in crooked lines on the sidewalks, the men with wrinkled faces staring at the parking lot and the state highway in the distance. It was strange to see a chain-link fence ten feet inside another chain-link fence." Thrown off balance, Brant dives into a relationship with Isa. She's ten years his senior, bitter as old coffee, and (as Huntington repeatedly reminds us) has "the ass of a two-hundred-pound truck driver." In a facility full of unhappy endings, Brant foolishly wishes for an easy answer—though it's immediately apparent that prison is the last place to look for one.

Mike Tyson Slept Here has a hilarious self-consciousness and a saving sense of humor. Huntington divides the novel into chapters, each ruled by a different perspective: we're as likely to hear Brant's voice as Isa's, or a prison guard's, or a crooked lawyer's. The Plainfield prison is alive with voices and stories, each one memorable and clear. And, more often than not, these stories are *funny*, laugh-out-loud. It's black comedy of the highest degree, and saves the novel from wandering into smarmy territory. In another writer's hands, *Mike Tyson* could have been a touching, coming of age, I'm-OK-you're-OK, brothers-of-all-races kind of book, and would be utterly forgettable. Huntington spares us the Lifetime version and cuts to the good stuff: raunchy jokes, injustice, the daily misery and joy of being a human being. For a relatively new writer, Huntington has found his voice, and, for the moment, a muse. But it's not Brant Gilmour that has the reader leaning into the book, sucking up sentence after sentence. It's Plainfield itself with its hall of voices, each deeply flawed, believable, and beautiful.

As Brant says, "I had a theory I'd shared with Isa once, that we were all Mike Tyson: gruesome inside but with voices like little birds, and we hurt people for no good reason except that it was a living, and it seemed some of us, like Tyson, were powerful and lucky and invincible until suddenly we weren't." Huntington celebrates the human spirit in all its imperfections, and offers the reader a surprise at every turn. One of the finest fiction books published this year, *Mike Tyson Slept Here* will go far—and hopefully garner a few more heavyweight prizes on its way.

Claire Rudy Foster