

Never Back Down

Ernest Hebert

David R. Godine (Jul 1, 2012)

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There are men who learn at a very young age to travel the safest path—do what your parents wish for you, never try to be better than you think you are. Jack Landry isn't that kind of man. Instead, he reaches far and high for the things he wants: the love of a beautiful woman, a career in professional baseball, an answer to the muttering dead grandmother who never quite leaves his head. Sadly, in the age-old tradition of hubris, Jack gets knocked back down again and again.

It isn't until he decides to follow the council of a flamboyant priest and accept his less-than-stellar position on the socioeconomic scale by marrying the town's loose woman and working as a laborer that he believes himself to be as happy as he deserves to be. But that, too, falls apart in a grand display of tragic fireworks. Only as threads of his earlier life begin to revisit him—in the persons of his oldest friend and the love of his life—can he believe in his own ability to be happy.

Hébert infuses this, his tenth novel, with his unique blend of wisdom, wonder, and practicality. His characters are the kind of people you're likely to meet driving a taxi cab, working in a diner, or clearing a forest of trees. But they're also the medium through which Hébert dispatches these questions: What makes a person successful? Who is responsible when bad things happen? Is a life of menial labor ultimately the most moral practice?

Small-town New Hampshire has been the focus of many novels, but Hébert doesn't work to hide the gritty layer that lies just below the white clapboard siding and charmingly taciturn old men. He instead uses settings such as the abandoned factory buildings to foreshadow the despair waiting for each character. "Against the walls were torn-open wooden crates piled high to the ceilings. The pitted concrete floor was littered with boards and nails. I brushed against a crate and a metal pipe from above fell at my feet."

Not a writer to shy away from hard subjects that matter, Hébert, director of the creative writing program at Dartmouth College, manages to blend esoteric exploration into compelling realism, producing a book that makes you want to both speed and slow down your reading pace. Like Jack, we want to hold on to the present and, at the same time, know what's around the next corner.

ANDI DIEHN (Fall 2012)

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