

Pictures of the Shark: Stories

Thomas H. McNeely

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An often sad and always compelling novel in short stories, Thomas H. McNeely's *Pictures of the Shark* follows Buddy, tracking the echoes of his parents' broken marriage as they reverberate through his coming-of-age.

In "Snow, Houston 1974," people are forced to stay home from work because of the weather. But Buddy's father refuses to do so, leading to an argument that Buddy overhears. As he learns the real story behind his parents' marriage and his father's frequent trips to the office, he starts to understand the mistrust that shapes his family.

That understanding carries throughout the book. In "Pictures of the Shark," Buddy's father takes him to see the mechanical shark from *Jaws*, his favorite movie at the time. But because his father brings along a new girlfriend, Buddy's camera and desire to take pictures become a source of family tension.

Though the stories all focus on Buddy and people connected to him, individual pieces take different approaches to his tale. "Ariel" is narrated by Buddy as a teenager; in it, he navigates his relationship with a girl who wants a new life in a town with him, and he also develops a drinking problem. The standout story "Hester" focuses on Sarah, whom Buddy dates during college, during a period when he is often drunk, and while he works at a restaurant that was just robbed. Sarah yearns to have just one aspect of her life be free from Buddy's control; when he shows up drunk at her workplace, it causes an awful chain reaction.

Mixing styles and snapshots from a life, the novel *Pictures of the Shark* shows how early damage can linger in a person's story—and reflects on the unexpected ways that it can manifest.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July / August 2022)

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