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Ray in Reverse

Daniel Wallace
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'Everybody goes to Heaven, Eloise,' he said.'It's just different for everybody.'

Ray's story begins in his own heaven, which consists of a coveted spot in the Last Words group where everyone lies about their last words to make themselves appear more interesting and clever. He then moves backward through his life as he relives his best and worst moments, and sees plainly for the first time the twisted path his life took. From his adulterous marriage back to his young-adult days of sexual confusion, all the way back to his early childhood lessons, Ray experiences the continuing devolution of his life.

Wallace explores Ray's personality with subtle grace and believability. No matter how different it seems in each capsulated episode of his life, the changes are never jarring, appearing as the natural evolution of a man. The novel begins with Ray at his most vulnerable, eaten through with cancer. From there it visits the dark passages of his marriage, filled with adultery which follows alienation from his family which follows an alcohol problem. Further back is Ray as a young adult beginning his career, in college, on his way to classes, selfish and centered on his confusion with sexuality and relationships. Finally his childhood unfolds and the reader is introduced to the unadulterated, innocent version of this man and comes to realize where everything began to turn for him.

Dark humor is a connecting thread between the segments of Ray's existence. In his college days, the reader is privy to the first draft of a letter he writes his girlfriend. In it, he compares the look on his father's face the day a circus elephant escaped and visited their backyard garden to the look on her face when she caught him with another man. From here he struggles to compare the two situations, performing an illogical leap as desperate people tend to do.

Ray in Reverse causes an examination of the reader's own life—not just a flashback to separate instances, but a consideration of how these affect personality and motive. It is a thoughtful book that nonetheless holds itself above the quagmire of too much psychology with the use of careful description, wit and flowing prose. (May CHRISTINE CANFIELD (April 15, 2000)

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