



General

Returning to Earth

Jim Harrison

Blackstone Audio

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Jim Harrison reminds readers frequently of the scent of lilacs in *Returning to Earth*; it is the kind of small detail he deftly weaves into a narrative that addresses the very largest of human experiences. Donald is dying. He begins the book by telling his family's story to his wife Cynthia, in order to leave his history behind for his loved ones. In succession those closest to him then share their lives and connections to Donald over the years, in three additional parts of the book, and in their own voices.

Returning to Earth is a masterwork by a mature and magical writer. Harrison has written thirteen other works of fiction, a children's book, ten collections of poetry, two nonfiction essay collections and a memoir. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and has been published in twenty-seven languages.

Donald's telling of his family's arrival to Michigan's Upper Peninsula is immediately engaging and stories of the much-loved Sallies in his family history (including a horse, a bear, and a woman) evocatively establish an intimate sense of the Native American and immigrant peoples from whom he has come. The synthesis of cultures and the evolving landscape explain a great deal about Donald's character and how he can simply say of his dying, "...these things happen to people." Harrison's spiritual musings are grounded in mystical Native American religion, but remain authentic with his skillful handling; readers will most certainly look at bears differently after reading the book. And by the time Donald's daughter Clare explains "There aren't very many people like my father any more...these kind of people are gone forever," the reader can well agree with her conclusion.

The experiences of Harrison's characters in *Returning to Earth* are universal; combined with his masterful writing, the book has wide appeal. His poignant simplicity, "It can't be awful if it happens to every living thing" is neatly breathtaking at times, and Harrison's wry crankiness is present as well, "...from suicide to sex in a moment."

The structure of the book lends itself well to a spoken version and Blackstone Audio has splurged in its production using a different narrator for each of the four parts/characters of the work; in only a handful of places are the unusual place names of remote northern Michigan locations mispronounced.

Returning to Earth is engaging storytelling. Harrison's characters address the most common human experience—death—as well as the smallest bits of life, like the smell of lilacs. And he leaves it up to the reader to decide which is the most significant.

Chris Arvidson