

★ **Second Best**

David Foenkinos

Megan Jones, Translator

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The ten-year-old boy who wasn't cast as Harry Potter faces a lifetime of anxiety and doubt in David Foenkinos's poignant novel *Second Best*.

Martin Hill's life begins when a producer offers him an audition for the role of Harry Potter. It ends a short time later when Daniel Radcliffe beats Martin out in the final stage of auditions. Haunted by an overwhelming sense of having ruined his life, Martin withdraws from the cruel Harry Potter-saturated world, only to find it invading his most intimate moments. His father dies; his mother leaves him alone with sadistic boyfriends who lock him in his room; a date is aborted when Martin sees *The Chamber of Secrets* on Mathilde's bookshelf and has a panic attack. Stumbling from therapists and psychological hospitals to remarkable success as a student and a Louvre attendant, Martin grows up blinded by the life he isn't living.

Embroidering the edges of Martin's story are dozens of other tangential narratives, ranging from the story of how his parents first met to coverage of the path that J. K. Rowling took to becoming an author. Decisive coincidences abound, as when a death in the family of Martin's babysitter results in his fateful audition.

Imbuing this slim novel with its gentle, melancholic beauty is a sense of the grandness of small things. There are no minor characters here. Even mundane, petty, and pitiful events have a history and dignity of their own. Broken into four parts, each consisting of tens of chapters, the writing comes in short, poetic bursts. Its sentences are wise, humorous, incisive, and simple; they add up to an engrossing reading experience.

A genealogy of the haphazard decisions and coincidences that align to create a life, *Second Best* is a bittersweet novel exploring what it means to live through failure.

WILLEM MARX (September / October 2023)

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