



Semaphore

G.W. Hawkes

(August 1998)

Unknown \$19.00 (222pp)

978-1-878448-82-8

The Greek meaning of “semaphor”—to bear a sign—weighs heavily on the protagonist, Joseph Taft, in this new novel by G.W. Hawkes. Joseph is prescient—he experiences glimpses of the future—and these glimpses are as heavy as one can imagine: his sister’s death in a neighbor’s pool, his father’s impending illness, apocalyptic images beyond his lifetime. To complicate the issue, Joseph is mute, but not deaf. The stuff of fantasy? Not a chance. This is a tale laden with the realistic: Joseph is a bright, responsive, sometimes angry boy growing up with intelligent and, for the most part, sensitive parents who, out of fear or utter respect, have not insisted that he betray his visions by communicating what he sees.

However, when Joseph steals a Diamond Reo dump truck to fill the pool where he foresees his sister’s drowning, he learns that trying to change the future only makes it worse. Powerless, he evolves into a troubled, fiercely private teen-ager who learns the only integrity he can hang onto is his silence. This integrity finally attracts a young woman, Luce, to his side. Through the slowly evolving relationship, the two manage, against all odds—and there are serious odds—to develop a heroic friendship and a complex, albeit quiet, marriage.

As an adult, still riddled with unwanted visions, he maintains his silence, both literally and figuratively, as the future he has seen unfolds and reaps a harvest for which he had not planned. His gift, always flawed, takes on destructive elements, but the results of his silence have more to do with the angst of the people he loves than with the scenes appearing in his mind. In the final sections of the book, he must struggle with his many visions and the uncertainty of all human reality.

I especially appreciate Hawkes’ technical dexterity. By shifting tense, sometimes mid-sentence, Hawkes snaps us from Joseph’s present to his “future.” Though these shifts create unexpected turns and challenging settings, this nonlinear format seems perfectly apt for a novel in which time’s power and destiny’s elements so richly mix. The lushly imagistic, richly detailed writing makes for a fine sensory read as well as a thoroughly satisfying story.

(July / August 1998)

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