

Short Century

David Burr Gerrard

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Short Century, by David Burr Gerrard, is a powerful novel about a father with a messy personal and political history.

The story opens with Arthur Hunt, an American journalist, speaking directly to readers, as he does throughout the book. The only context given is a fictional editor's note, written by an unnamed friend of Arthur, introducing the main body of the book as a document recovered from Arthur's computer. The note builds curiosity by sharing bits of critical information: Arthur was killed in a bombing at a funeral, in life he fought injustice, and he made a "vile mistake."

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Arthur is controversial for two reasons: he supports US war efforts in an Islamic country (which, according to the editor's note is simply referred to as REDACTED for legal reasons) and he had a sexual relationship with his sister—a long-buried fact that's been revealed shortly before Arthur writes the account that fills the book.

Arthur's voice is desperate, hurt, and defensive, allowing him to elicit compassion, despite his flaws. While his present lifestyle and past problems are unique, his sense of alienation and desire to be understood are universal. He explains his relationship with his sister not to declare his innocence but to ask for forgiveness. Arthur's earnest pain makes this unthinkable request feel possible.

The supporting characters—primarily Arthur's children; their mother, Miranda; and Arthur's sister, Emily—are filtered compellingly through Arthur's point of view and, paradoxically, their opposition to him makes it feel natural to be on his side.

The book contains a lengthy afterword by Arthur's daughter, Sydney. Her sinister, sarcastic voice adds insight into the family's past and closure to the events of Arthur's death—but the growing revelation of her sociopathic behavior leaves the ending with a disturbing sense of, "What next?"

Gerrard's narrative style is intense and fast paced. The author doesn't filter language or sexuality inherent in Arthur's life; it's not overly graphic, but since the story contains incest it will likely prompt squeamishness. Because Arthur composed the narrative as a manic communication rather than a cohesive book, there are no chapter breaks; line breaks between sections, however, do offer a chance to breathe in the midst of the action.

The novel resonates boldly with modern, scandal-loving, witch-hunting society, and it gives a voice to the consequences of the Internet turning the public against a person (Arthur's secret was revealed by an anonymous blogger). The back cover copy makes the book seem like it might be too issue-laden, inelegantly hitting hot button issues, but Gerrard weaves issues (such as fear of Islam and the role of violence in pursuing freedom) in through character dialogue, believable action, and the natural strain in family relationships.

But more than its political and societal commentary, it's a private story of a man and his family, and how secrets and lies fester in the hearts of individuals, creating a thirst that can only be quenched by reconciliation and forgiveness.

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MELISSA WUSKE (February 27, 2014)

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