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Clarion Review ★★★★★ SHORT STORIES

Sixteen Stories

J.E. Dougherty
BookSurge
978-1-4392-4578-1

J.E. Dougherty explores life, love, and complex choices with candid honesty in this collection of sixteen short stories. His characters' lives and souls are laid bare, exposed with a forthright and thought-provoking ruthlessness that keeps the reader ruminating on the outcomes long after the last page has been turned.

Beginning with "Winter Twilight," a spectacularly intriguing story in which a priest's faith is challenged by an eerily mysterious visitor to his confessional, readers are drawn into tales ranging from the spiritual to the worldly. Obsession in its many forms and the pursuit of perfection in art and love illustrate the often irresistible human urge to constantly strive for something more.

The unique characters in Dougherty's stories vary from artists and writers to a police officer and teacher, all of whom face similar struggles in their search for whatever it is they desire: love, fame, contentment, or acceptance. While each story stands alone, they all emphasize the universal need for satisfaction in life. As one of the characters in "The Legacy" claims, "Unveil desire and discover that its essence springs from being unfulfilled." This pursuit of personal fulfillment is a common theme, explored in many ways throughout the stories.

In Sixteen Stories, writers agonize over each word, artists strive for creative excellence, musicians yearn to be heard, and lovers search for soul mates. Their journeys demonstrate the ways in which one's choices can often have irrevocable and unexpected consequences. A writer's suicidal musings might inspire readers to choose the same tragic path, and a cop's desire for justice can transform him into the type of criminal he seeks to condemn. By the same token, a man's desertion of his family may unpredictably turn out to be the best thing for all concerned.

Dougherty, who also wrote The Ocean's Breath, exhibits remarkable insight into the human psyche, particularly the mind of the artist. Through writers, painters, and musicians, the all-consuming desire to create a work of complete perfection is explored with brutal clarity, with the consequences of dedication and commitment to the art often echoing beyond the work itself. For instance, in "Sanguine Study," a painter's disdain for the hypocrisy of a world that worships sameness but demands originality leads him to an extreme and rather bloody resolution, and the repercussions of his actions reach beyond his own personal sacrifice—even into another character's story.

The author's style is distinctive and vibrant, with scrupulous attention to detail and description. Words flow smoothly and often quite beautifully: "a quilt of currents glittered like sinuous sapphires perched on the surface, animated by the sun's warmth," he writes. Characters are eloquent and well-developed, their trials sure to resonate with readers.

Some atypical word choices are certain to expand reader vocabulary, and the italicized dialogue is an interesting—if unusual—alternative to quotation marks. Regardless, Dougherty's prose is much like the works of art he describes throughout Sixteen Stories: intricate and illuminating, occasionally complex and challenging, yet always and undeniably original.

JEANNINE CHARTIER HANSCOM (July 1, 2010)

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