



Spontaneous Human Combustion

Richard Thomas

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With elements of horror, fantasy, and science fiction, the fourteen tales of Richard Thomas's *Spontaneous Human Combustion* explore gruesome acts and fears.

Set in landscapes ranging from mundane to spectacular, and from Chicago's suburbs to surreal desert prisons, these suspenseful stories represent a unique, disturbing vision of human nature. In "From Within," a father fails to protect his son from alien overlords; his son carries a repulsive pet into his captivity. A cruel man who's trapped in a mysterious room in "Requital" thirsts for water as replicas of his victims pass by in nauseating hordes.

Despite the stories' squirm-worthy sensory details, many of their characters fall into predictable patterns. The book's men are prone to remorse and resignation, while its women are variously objectified, duplicitous, or avengers who administer degrading punishments. Some fight to stay sane in worlds split in two, or try to balance their warring selves; people bear witness to the carnage that results when values conflict with urgent needs. Most enigmatic are the book's monsters, who range from reluctant to morally complex to pure evil.

Duality and the stresses that it inflicts on human hearts is the haunting connective tissue between individual stories. This theme reaches an apex of originality in "The Caged Bird Sings in a Darkness of Its Own Creation," which features a genderless creator who "will make decisions ... both horrible and inspired." Other stories, like "Saudade," weave between conflicting selves, using cinematic imagery to generate suspense about which self will prevail.

Imaginative and propulsive, the stories of *Spontaneous Human Combustion* confront universal human fears in supernatural, futuristic worlds.

MICHELE SHARPE (January / February 2022)

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