

Survival Rates

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While Clyde's stories happen to be set in the Southwest, they can be read as reports from the front lines of the dominant culture anywhere in America. People live in single family homes, drive cars, go to shopping malls and eat dessert mix from the bowl without bothering to bake it. Usually there is something wrong. A dog bites a girl's nose. People get cancer. People fall from a ski lift. Marriages fall apart.

These traumatic events are plot premises, not plot actions. The stories are about how the characters respond. Prior to the dog bite, the little girl's nose was ugly. Should the surgeon build her a pretty one? A wife finds her husband's cavalier attitude toward his cancer intolerable. Would it be a victory, and whose would it be, if he finally admits his mortality?

There is anger in many of these stories, a reasonable reaction to the problem of evil. Still, it comes as a relief to discover there is humor as well. Sometimes anger and humor intertwine, as in the shopping mall observations of two young cancer survivors: "The mannequins have erect nipples but no facial features."

The author writes compellingly about young people and adults, men and women. Young people, of course, are uncomfortable. Women tend to be serious, confused, searching. Men tend to be oblivious to pain, a bit goofy and "prone to mottos of treacly optimism." The author pays her respects to the male motif in "A Good Paved Road," a story in which a woman realizes her mistake in avoiding the road less traveled precisely because she feared her traveling companion did not approach life with the proper severity.

For a book with so many traumatic events, it is curiously uplifting. The final story in the collection, "Jumping," ends with such radiance and transcendence as to qualify as benevolent magic. It is little wonder that *Survival Rates* has won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Fiction.

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