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Literary

Swimmer in the Secret Sea
William Kotzwinkle
David R. Godine
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The "problem" with novellas that take just over an hour to read is that, if the author has done a stellar job, it may take twice as long for a reader to adequately describe the experience. *Swimmer in the Secret Sea is such a book*; William Kotzwinkle such a writer.

This lovely little book—little only in the physical sense—began as an O. Henry Prize-winning serialization in *Redbook* in 1975 (when magazines did such things with exceptional fiction). The story too is not new, but is one of the oldest humans tell, about longing, hope, love, birth, death, and carrying on.

But Kotzwinkle, who's successfully published an eclectic mix of fantasy and experimental novels, children's books, science fiction, and film novelizations (*E.T.*, for one), brings to Johnny Laski, a would-be father and self-sufficient rural artist, a deeply-nuanced humanity.

On the surface, the story might be considered scant—only one thing really happens: a baby struggles to be born; a couple hopes; then mourns. But within that story, the author presents most human emotions worth writing about. Parts are blunt, where Kotzwinkle places pain and reality center stage, but this heightens the characters' dignity and despair.

Kotzwinkle writes, about Laski returning to his woodland cabin after his child is stillborn, "He laid his T-square on the mark, drew a straight line, and sawed along it, thinking about the old days when men had always built the caskets of their loved ones, and he saw that it was a good thing to do, that it was a privilege few men had anymore."

Throughout, the metaphor of the sea provides an alternately soothing and wrenching backdrop during Laski's reflective moments. From the "it's time" moment and race to the hospital, through an anxious labor and birth complications, the doctor's revival attempts, and the aftermath, we are inside Laski's head and heart, often both at once.

Perhaps because he was writing at a time when expectant fathers shared some but not all the hospital experience, and postpartum women were hospitalized for days, Kotzwinkle is able to cast Laski in a solitary, days-long reverie. The cold, still northern winter landscape and the remoteness of the couple's deep rural life are both counterpoints to the comforting, sometimes nourishing sea imagery, and then, accomplices to that same sea which rages, damages, smashes all.

But Laski is not smashed He emerges, scathed and humbled, but hopeful and also hungry, for life. Didn't all life come from the sea?

Lisa Romeo