

The Consequences of Playing God: Tales from Lingor High School

Robert Joseph Foley

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Robert Joseph Foley's *The Consequences of Playing God: Tales from Lingor High School* is a sly, masterful, acrid, and wrenching collection of short stories. Comparisons to the work of, say, Flannery O'Connor and Sherwood Anderson seem appropriate, as Foley, too, seems to enjoy disguising the grubby truth in evolved, erudite rhetoric.

Foley's characters are not always noble, and his prose is not always lofty, but readers can keenly sense the discrepancy between the intellectual, sometimes elevated tone and the intensely painful, withering content. There is an unmistakable lushness, almost an embarrassment of richness, to Foley's writing. His use of language is vivid and authoritative: "When the panoply of brilliant autumn colors begins its drift into the deathly pall of winter browns, when all wise creatures have dug their cradles and stored provisions deep inside the earth." Readers can't help but notice how Foley weds birth and death by suggesting that cradles are dug.

One of this author's great strengths is his penchant for exploring moral ambiguity. While some of his stories have decidedly ecclesiastical titles ("The Book of Timothy," "Michael The Archangel," "The Gospel According to Tim"), Foley seems to take endless delight in undercutting his protagonist's noble intentions with dubious motives. In "The Ballad of Tomasso," the father aches for the future of his son, a gifted tenor whose only hope for retaining his extraordinary gift is castration. Despite the oddly compelling case made for this grotesque solution, Foley doesn't hesitate to suggest it could also remedy the jealousy the father feels when his wife lavishes attention on their son.

In the more complex "Peter Penarius," we see an aging, frustrated, probably closeted gay high school English teacher fighting the nearly toxic apathy of students, parents, and administrators. And while we don't question the legitimacy of his concerns, his contempt for duller students and attraction to a protégé dilutes our sympathy. Foley imbues his stories with depth of understanding by refusing to acknowledge untainted altruism.

If there is one weakness in these absorbing and provocative narratives, it would be Foley's need to elaborate at some length. Though it could be considered more meticulous than extraneous, readers may feel that they're tracing a chambered nautilus as it slowly, luxuriously winds in upon itself. For others, this might be considered an egregious lapse in judgment, but Foley's precise and intuitive wielding of music and meaning makes it negligible. No lover of piercing, tumultuous literature should miss it.

CHRISTOPHER SODEN (May 10, 2013)

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