ForeWord Reviews

The Dirty Shame Hotel: and Other Stories
Ron Block
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Risking both humor and pathos, Ron Block's first collection of stories provides welcome evidence that minimalism is finally losing its grip on American fiction. Set in the upper Midwest, Block's home territory, these stories give us people far more diverse in their temperaments, blunders, and commitments than the bland, stolid, white-bread stereotypes of the region forced upon us by New Yorkers (who at least can plead ignorance) and the affectionate but rather too gentle portraits of Garrison Keillor. Block's people inhabit a wide and sometimes wild world in which demons suddenly turn up in closets, learning to type can be the turning point of a lonely woman's life, and the term 'bookworm' takes on a terrible, literal danger. In the title story, the marvelously, ambiguously deranged Dr. Charles Orrin moves among a set of derelicts, misfits and petty criminals, carrying on about the "Orrin Effect" to mostly unwilling listeners: "The young are obviously sucked IN to old age, correct? But beauty - the most splendid possession of the young - is also a sucker, and the beholder, longing for beauty, is sucked towards it."

So how can the young be both the suckers and sucked? The answer to this seeming contradiction is the "Orrin Effect." Sharp, wry and resonant, this slim volume of stories covers a considerable emotional and intellectual range. The depth and humor of Block's writing - and his whimsically passionate view of the human condition - makes for pleasurable and satisfying reading.

Jeff Gundy