



The Fear of Everything

John McNally

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John McNally's excellent short story collection *The Fear of Everything* includes nine tales of subtle terror.

Beginning with "The Magician," this book marks its territory: it specializes in a kind of removed, intellectual suburban unease. These stories are not inhabited by traditional supernatural monsters, but rather by the specters of regret for decisions made or not made, and by the repercussions of unrealized opportunities and events long past. What seems a somewhat typical American scene—a magician performing his act for a school classroom—becomes a meditation on kidnapped children and the pain, resentment, and even violence that follows such an occurrence long after it's happened.

Elements of the fantastic are seen throughout, as in "The Phone Call," where Doug calls his old home phone number and speaks to his younger self and long dead mother. That plot device might seem familiar, and there's another link to fantasy tradition in young Doug's fascination with film monsters. But the story uses these touchstones as elements to expand the possibilities of the traditional fantasy/horror framework, delivering a haunting tale of regret and helplessness.

The writing is grounded in realism, which makes its turns toward fantasy all the more affecting. Descriptions result in lingering images. In "The Creeping End," a detective and his wife put their pet dog to sleep with the aid of their veterinarian: "All three of them put their hands on the animal as though it were a sacred thing in possession of restorative powers."

From a narrative detour into the past amid religious fervor and jealousy in antebellum Illinois, or a story revolving around a modern-day kitchen accident, each entry is compelling. The final tale is a bookend of sorts: a story about a missing girl, told through the eyes of an obsessed man.

The Fear of Everything is a visceral, brainy collection whose dark, sophisticated stories are satisfying.

PETER DABBENE (September / October 2020)

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