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The View from Below: Stories

Lindsey Crittenden
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Nothing cuts through the veil of illusion quicker than a sharp stab of reality, especially the stabbing pain of loss—be it death, exile or innocence. It is human nature to deny that anything bad could happen to oneself or friends or family, but everyone experiences loss sooner or later. How deeply loss affects one's view of and relations in the world depends on how that loss is handled. In the nine short stories in The View from Below, Crittenden vividly captures these feelings of loss and how they are handled by taking her readers into the lives of nine different people.

Each of the nine short stories shows a different loss as well as the main character's unique way of dealing with that loss. Robin, a girl on the verge of adulthood, her childhood innocence shattered by discovering that her parents aren't perfect, tries to deny her budding, negative adult viewpoints by continuing her childlike behavior and ignoring adult events. Holly, a young archeologist who has trouble finding a wholesome relationship, looks to her dead brother's wise advice on finding "a taker" when she thinks she may have found someone special. Claire, looking from the position of mistress and tortured by a caller after she ends the relationship, finds in herself the strength to deal with the loss of a lover and start fresh. Mollie, unable to understand her friend's slight retardation until her friend is sent away to a special school, envies her friend's lack of awareness of the evil side of human nature. A little girl named Jamie is forced to grow up early when she accepts the fact that her father can longer stay with the family. Wendy, not able to deal with her brother's criminality, is falling apart with the excess demands of those around her. Kit, incapable of dealing with the loss of her father, looks for him in her boyfriend and is let down when Jeff is different from what she expects, but is unwilling to leave him because of how much he reminds her of her father. Wade, a delinquent and drug user who cannot break free of his addiction, returns to his van and drug-using girlfriend to escape the reality of seeing his successful sister on the streets of the city. A woman, afraid of losing her sense of self if she gets more than physically intimate with her boyfriend, discovers that perhaps in sharing emotions, there is something more to be gained and nothing really to lose.

Crittenden's style of writing, deep and penetrating, is honestly stark to the point of being depressing, but the protagonists' revelations—or lack thereof—are what make these stories so poignantly appealing to all who are interested in contemporary human drama. Winner of the Mid-List Press First Series Award for Short Fiction, this debut collection is likely to haunt readers' thoughts for a long, long time.
NELLY HEITMAN (December 16, 1998)

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