ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

The World of a Few Minutes Ago
Jack Driscoll
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The punishing conditions in the lives of the characters in Jack Driscoll's short story collection are matched by the harsh landscape of Michigan's Northwest and Upper Peninsula (particularly during the long winter months). These men and women are desperately seeking a way out of their dead-end existences, and while few find the spiritual and physical relief they're looking for, all are rendered with deep sympathy and understanding.

Driscoll, the author of four novels and four poetry collections, has received numerous honors for his work, including the PEN/Nelson Algren Fiction Award and the AWP Short Fiction Award. The ten stories collected here have appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, and elsewhere.

Grief, remorse, and stubborn hope form the core of many of the stories in *The World of a Few Minutes Ago*. One of the most powerful stories, "After Everyone Has Left," focuses on Doyle Laidlaw as he attends the scheduled execution of convicted murder Clifford Lee Valentine in Texas. Doyle's daughter, Ellie, vanished thirteen years earlier, and Valentine may have knowledge of her fate—or, Doyle fears, "it's all an act, a predictable, last-gasp, dead-man-walking kind of con hastily cut and pasted from old news clippings of cases still unsolved." As he waits and hopes for some revelation, we learn more about the circumstances of his daughter's disappearance. In the end, the executed killer cheats Doyle of the knowledge he yearns for, but we are given a powerful and heartbreaking portrait of grief and loss.

In "Saint Ours," a young woman named Charlene wants to break free of her suffocating life in northern Michigan but can't quite do it. Abused and maltreated by a series of men ("lazy, good-for-nothing pig-eyed bottom feeders"), she's moved in with Grove, a decent, soft-spoken backwoodsman, and hopes for the best. In the end, Charlene is one of the few characters in this collection to escape, though her long-term chances for success are sketchy at best.

Although Driscoll shares Raymond Carver's insights into and empathy for blue-collar desperation, his language is anything but minimalist. He's punch-drunk on words, as illustrated

by the narrator of “Prowlers,” in praise of the woman he’s chosen to join in a life of petty crime:

> *Foolhardy, I know, and in a show of hands at this late juncture I’d still vote for probing our imaginations in more conventional, stay-at-home married ways … But all I have to do is observe how Marley-Anne licks the salt rim of a margarita glass, and I comprehend all over again her arrested maternal development and why I’ve continued against my better judgment to follow her anywhere, body and soul, pregnant or not.*

Fans of the work of Lee K. Abbott and the late, legendary Barry Hannah will find much to savor in Jack Driscoll’s colorful stories of hope and despair. His characters may feel lost and crushed under the weight of their lives, but their plight is recognizable and deeply familiar to us all.

Lee Polevoi