



★ **To Know You're Alive**

Dakota McFadzean

Conundrum Press (Sep 1, 2020)

Softcover \$20.00 (160pp)

978-1-77262-049-8

Dakota McFadzean's story collection *To Know You're Alive* is deliberate, creepy, and wonderful.

These stories might be called haunting or disturbing, but that loose description doesn't do justice to their subtle and graceful complexity. The first story profiles a man remembering his time as a young boy with the gnoshlox, creatures that came alive from the clay in his sandbox. As with a later story, "Hollow in the Hollows," contemplative pacing indicates that something more than a simple scare is happening; both stories carry an implicit commentary on the dangerous power of childhood imagination.

Other stories feature kids exploring an old house, growing more misshapen as they do; a girl terrorized by a breakfast cereal mascot; and a stay-at-home dad narrating a strange experience while watching Mister Rogers with his son. Humor and terror sometimes share space in the same sentence: "There was something moving around the darkened set of Mister Rogers' house."

The writing is brilliant and imaginative, providing just a nudge in one direction or another that leaves the reader to fill in the blanks. It's engaging, mysterious, and satisfying. The characterizations of children are noteworthy, with small details that speak volumes—a girl's excitement over a Scholastic Book order in "Buzzy," or her tortured, lonely classmate's bitter response: "That book is for idiots."

The masterful art shifts styles from one story to the next to suit the mood, or sometimes to ironically oppose it. One half of an equal partnership, the images convey as much plot and characterization as does the text. *To Know You're Alive* is a thoughtful, chilling peek into the darkest corners of life.

PETER DABBENE (September / October 2020)

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