

To Tell You the Truth: Stories

Robert Moulthrop

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Moulthrop draws moral human lessons from thoroughly believable people in this literary short story collection.

Robert Moulthrop offers eleven short stories that function as neat windows of realism through which people of a certain age and class stumble down life's pathway.

Moulthrop is a gifted, accomplished writer, published multiple times and with multiple awards. His characters are familiar—professors, business people—and sometimes muddling, sometimes confused, yet never worrying about bank balances or the next mortgage payment.

Some, as in Sam in “Where Are You?,” one of the more emotionally affecting stories, know themselves not at all. Here, Moulthrop definitively frames a man's loss of perceived self with a narrative, winding through memory, conversation, and dialogue. Sam is a man readers know, or think they know, until a climatic revelation fractures every perception. The story's pace, expansion, and climax are superb.

Moulthrop's artful observations work well in the title story, in which a woman's friend leaves her husband. The focus on a minor detail, the narrator's love of ironing—“I was good at it, the same way some people are good at bookkeeping”—reveals character, place, and status.

The author's technique will satisfy aficionados of realistic short fiction, particularly his ability to draw moral and ethical lessons from thoroughly believable scenarios, situations, and people. Moulthrop's settings are indefinite, generally eastern or midwestern by inference, but his plots require only what might be termed “interior settings” to be established; his characters feel truly in place, urban but not metropolitan, educated but not elite.

Plots appear simple yet reveal conflict and character enlightenment. In the final story, “Barzini to the Rescue,” a young boy is treasured by his mother's uncle and aunt, two happy souls who were once vaudeville circuit performers. The boy's father, a banker, is conservative and controlling, never comfortable around the uncle and aunt, a situation exacerbated when he is pressured to help them finance a farm. Here, Moulthrop exposes multigenerational conflict, class conflict, and a conflict of values.

Themes are beautifully rendered, often focusing on loss. A man is reminded of mortality when a neighbor's child is killed. Worlds collapse when marriages falter. An artist grows senile, the painful loss reflected through his wife and children, who treasured his passion for life. In one of the more powerful efforts, “Far Rockaway,” readers confront love and passion, identity and commitment.

Moulthrop writes with a touch for literary language: “The houses stood each apart, separated one from another by sudden driveways or cool strips of low, dark green shrubs.” He is a gifted writer, and while one or two stories may have less than fulfilling endings, his writing is sophisticated and intelligent enough that an inquisitive reader will not be discouraged. This book is highly recommended for followers of modern short fiction.

GARY PRESLEY (March 4, 2014)

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