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Literary Collections

What Are You Afraid Of?
Michael Hyde
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A good title goes a long way—not that this author needs any help. Lucky for readers, the ten stories that make up this debut collection are every bit as gripping as the book's provocative title suggests. Set in and around the Pennsylvania town of Sinking Springs, these quixotic stories are not thrillers in the traditional sense. Rather, they tell of ordinary people searching for spiritual answers in a material world, a process all the more terrifying because of its familiarity.

In "People's Choice" a farmer's wife eager to see her husband win a prize in the town fair for his unusual Siamese calf secretly sets it free the night before the competition in a desperate attempt to save her failing marriage. When his foster parents leave for summer vacation without him, the lonely teenager in "Life Among the Bulrushes" forces his ailing grandmother to join him in a four-day fast to test the existence of God.

What Are You Afraid Of? is the fourth winner of the Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction Series, sponsored by the University of North Texas Press. Although this marks the author's first published book-length work, his fiction is well recognized and has appeared in the *Ontario Review*, *Bloom* and *The Best American Mystery Stories 2001*. Hyde, a native of Pennsylvania, received his M.F.A. from Columbia University in New York City and currently teaches writing and literature at the Fashion Institute of Technology. He recently completed his first novel.

Of all Hyde's talents, versatility is what most distinguishes his work from other contemporary short-story writers. He is a master of perspective, embracing masculine and feminine, first- and third-person points of view with equal authority and ease. His protagonists range in age from twelve to fifty. Some are gay, others straight; some comfortable and others dirt poor. It is almost hard to believe that the breezy narrative style of "Her Hollywood," about a teenage girl obsessed with re-enacting the rape-murder of the town beauty, sprang from the same imagination as "Hydra," a lyrical piece about a young boy haunted by metaphoric

premonitions of his own impending death.

Appropriately, the common thread that links these sometimes very different stories is the contradictory nature of life itself. Illusion effects reality. What people fear they also can't help but desire. One character who finds himself suddenly attracted to a woman he despises expresses his resignation to this paradox with surprising eloquence: "If too much of a good thing were poison, could too much of a bad thing be anything else than undeniably good?"