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When I Was Five I Killed Myself

Howard Buten
Overlook Press The (July 2000)
Unknown $23.95 (156pp)
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The publishing tale of how Buten's graceful and bril-

liant novel about an autistic young boy is nearly as interesting as the book itself. First published in 1981, the novel received critical acclaim but languished in the blurry region between adolescent and adult fiction, and quickly dropped out of bookstores. After a French publisher picked it up, it went on to become a bestseller in translation, making the American novelist famous overseas. Luckily, U.S. readers are now being given another chance.

Although the book's journey from America to France and back again is a complicated story rife with marketing strategies, authorial disappointment and foreign rights deals, the novel itself has a lucid style reminiscent of Hemingway, and an unadorned plot that creates instant empathy for Burt, the child narrator.

Drawing on his experiences working with autistic children, the author creates a little boy whose world is a mix of cold reality and gentle fantasy. At the beginning of the novel, he's sent to The Children's Trust Residence Center and told only that he hurt his friend Jessica and must communicate to gain freedom. His indignation at being placed in the institution, and his fervent desire to speak to Jessica and make sure she isn't seriously injured, combine to make him withdraw emotionally and lash out violently at the unresponsive therapist, thus dooming him to stay indefinitely in the home. A first-year doctor with experimental methods is seen as a near-hero by Burt, and almost generates a breakthrough, but at the more traditional psychiatrist treating the young boy balks, setting up an interesting clash of psychological methods that parallel the mental conflicts in Burt.

A passage about mealtime at the institution shows the inner anguish of the small boy: "At breakfast today I made a hippopotamus out of my oatmeal, which was all dried up. I made a bed for him out of cinnamon toast and I took my napkin and made a blanket. Then I took my spoon and beat him to death."

Buten wonderfully captures a child's frame of mind, making Burt a whole and appealing character without resorting to overly simplistic language. He creates psychological suspense without exploiting Burt's "crime" against Jessica, and leads the reader on a journey through childhood autism that proves enlightening as well as fascinating.
ELIZABETH MILLARD (May / June 2000)

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