

You Would Have Told Me Not To

Christopher Coake

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The seven stories of Christopher Coake's realistic and memorable collection *You Would Have Told Me Not To* concern the various stages of failed relationships.

Interplays between complicated people's thoughts and actions carry the stories, whose characters contemplate their choices, their escalating circumstances, and how their pasts brought them to their current situations. The powerful story "This Will Come as a Surprise to You" is narrated by a woman who has returned to her hometown after an absence of years. While taking her son to a local coffee shop, she encounters her abusive ex-husband. Curious at first, she soon obsesses over what he's done in the years since, looking him up online, trying to figure out if he has changed as much as his new life suggests, and debating whether she should say anything to his fiancée. Each piece of information that she finds leads her to dig further, like touching a sore though she knows it will hurt.

Other compelling entries include "Waste," in which a middle-aged day worker suspects that one of the new men on the job might be his son. The possibility occupies his thoughts during a dangerous assignment. In "You Would Have Told Me Not To," a woman rushes to visit her son as he recovers from a gunshot wound, only to learn that he's been keeping much more about his life from her—and that her ex is also visiting. Darker is the novella "Big Guy," in which a divorced, obese man obsesses over dropping his weight, growing more and more entitled, and dangerous, as his plan works.

The characters of *You Would Have Told Me Not To* deal with crises including infidelity, abuse, and divorce, but the real drama comes from events' aftermaths and their emotional impacts.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July / August 2020)

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