Man Descending Short Guide

Man Descending by Guy Vanderhaeghe

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Contents

Social Concerns

This is a collection of twelve superbly crafted stories about males at various stages of life, but the settings for the fiction are vividly rendered and provide telling evidence of the modern age that breeds regret, impotent rage, comic exasperation, and bittersweet inertia. Human wisdom in these stories is not necessarily linked to urban sophistication, for in "The Watcher/' a marvelous story about a young boy's initiation into a world of adult conflict and treachery, an old hard-talking, quick-witted grandmother on a farm shows her skill with the ways of the world. Her daughter's lover, a sadistic bully from the city with supercilious contempt for rural life, is given a tough lesson in justice and treachery.

Family relationships are sharply etched in this book, with their span of love, resentment, teasing cruelty, and vanity. Vanderhaeghe explores with perfect poise the stifling enclosures for his characters, allowing us to probe the family background of his suffering protagonists. In "Cages," a deeply touching story about an adolescent's changing perception of his father, Vanderhaeghe creates a suffocating mood at once congruent with the father's occupation as a miner and with the young narrator's sense of psychological constriction. The boy's impulses toward bitterness are checked by an underlying sympathy and love for the father — somewhat reminiscent of another young narrator's elegiac love for his paranoid father in "What I Learned From Caesar."

The widest social reach in this collection is shown in "The Expatriates' Party," where a middle-aged widower discovers in expatriation (his own and that of others) a metaphor for the anxiety-neurosis of our times. Marked and marred by restlessness, his journey to England for a reunion with his married son becomes a painful journey into himself.

Perhaps the most powerful sector of social concern is that of marriage, for it is here that domestic trial and tribulation are read as a symptom of a much broader ethos. When things fall apart and the center does not hold, chaos — both comic and serious — takes hold, and suffering in various modes becomes a vivid graph of society's descent into perplexity, inertia, or proliferating folly. The final story, "Sam, 2629 Soren, and Ed" is clearly about a marriage on the rocks, and although its wild, dark comedy is abundantly entertaining, there is a sense of topsy-turvy moral standards. The narrator is betrayed by a former close friend, once a hairy radical activist, but now blunted by affluence. The narrator, a writermanque, feels dissociated from what he does — a malady of the modern age. It is to Vanderhaeghe's credit that gloom and doom are turned into startling black comedy which mirrors a confusing age.

Techniques

Often the significance of a story hinges on a single image or a powerful twist in the action. In "The Watcher," the image that crystallizes the final irony is that of an Oriental statue. The boy puts the academic bully in mind of Padma-sambhava, the Hindu idol with close-set eyes that suggest concentration and intense inner vision. Ironically, it is the boy who, after witnessing every sordid incident in the story, makes the final decision to side with his grandmother against Thompson, and passes in the process from pastoral innocence to a rather risky adventure in the lower regions of experience.

In "Cages" the title is most expressive of the psychological mood of a story that moves from occupational discomfort to emotional and mental entrapment. The miner's cage and occupation become stark analogies for the young narrator's descent into his father's mind and heart.

Vanderhaeghe's technique is emblematic rather than symbolic, for the images are precise and their context concretely rendered. There is no impulsion toward airy, abstract generalizations, for the images appear to grow naturally out of the stories — as in "Dancing Bear," for instance, where the title expresses the paradox of a dangerous, persecuted animal which is as much a victim as a killer. This bear is a perfect analogy for the central character, an old, incapacitated man whose zealous imagination causes him to burst with pent-up frustration.

The wonder of Vanderhaeghe's writing consists in the suspenseful mixture of terror and comedy. Although the vision of the present and the future is generally gloomy, Vanderhaeghe always leaves the reader with some protection against the spreading dark.

Themes/Characters

Although most often about victims — people caged by their limited imaginations, personal problems, and paranoid feelings — Vanderhaeghe's stories are suffused with sympathy or compassion for the vulnerable. The existential gloom is somewhat dispelled by a wry humor in the main characters, whose perceptions of reality, although occasionally wacky, unhinged, or eccentric, are tempered by simple urges for love, security, and acknowledgment.

If pessimism is viewed as a prelude to a new world — why write if there is no hope? — then one would certainly be justified to call Man Descending a pessimistic book. It is filled with stories about fear, guilt, anxiety, the loss of control, mental unhingement, and life in descent. Yet the insights are so humanely wrought, the balance of pain and laughter so skillfully maintained, that there are cracks of light, glimmers of faith and grace amid the gathering gloom.

Family problems are only the start of much larger existential conflicts. In "The Watcher," young Charlie victimized by a bad chest since childhood, suffers greater psychological afflictions on his grandmother's farm when he has to choose between loyalty to her hard pattern of living, and a stranger's aggressive, bullying stratagems to take control of everything. The boy's naivete about his essential role as a voyeur generates much humor, but the real subject is not so much the boy's amazing experiences as a watcher, but of his widening awareness of his own struggle to liberate himself from the "grip of ignorance" and the spheres of weakness.

Families frequently become dangerous cages of emotional turmoil and personality conflicts (as in "Reunion") or of great fears (as in "How The Story Ends"), but the worst cage of all is that sense of life as a suffocating, parasitical pattern ("Cages"). In "Reunion" the young boy at the center of a vicious family quarrel is confused by the internecine upheaval. The teasing toughness of one side of the family and the reciprocations of the other generate an unpleasant tartness, which is quite unusual in Vanderhaeghe's literary universe. This is not a book of unrelieved gloom. In "Cages," where the boynarrator's father is a miner, the images of descent, mining, and elevator cars are of crucial significance to the sense of a close, choking feeling about life.

This is a touching story about a father's slipping from his sense of high courage, and of the narrator's dawning realization of what family love means.

Vanderhaeghe graphs the loss of psychological control. In "The Expatriates Party," Joe, the middle-aged widower who goes to England to be reunited with his married son, allows his personal recriminations to get the better of him. Wishing to punish his son, he presents him with a photograph of his mother's embalmed body. This moment is epiphanic in more ways than one, for, in addition to showing Ed's callous irrationality, it reveals an underlying motif. The world for Ed has changed so radically since his wife's painful death from cancer, that he does not recognize the England of the present, his own son beneath the ersatz Anglophilinism, or his own boundary of emotional

breakdown. Something bothers him about his son and his friends. Something bothers him about modern England.

Something bothers him about expatriates in general. And it is only at the end that he discovers that he himself might be the ultimate expatriate. Had he been lost for thirty years, "an expatriate wandering"? Had those hot clamors of his schoolteaching days been exile? Was he a harder man than he himself had imagined? Was he nothing but "a drunkard who kicked at strangers in the streets, a man who punished his son by giving him pictures of his dead mother?"

"The Expatriates' Party" ends with a piece of truth that becomes the acid test of every adult character in Vanderhaeghe's fiction: how to learn the trick or knack of survival. The final two stories in the collection present the process and part of the results of this test.

"Man Descending" and "Sam, Soren, and Ed" share the same protagonist — a rather obese, enervated married man with adolescent behavior patterns.

Continually criticized by his wife, for being lazy, immature, and unimaginative, he is fired from his job but lies about his future prospects, knowing full well that he is in descent: "I know now that I have begun the inevitable descent, the leisurely glissade which will finally topple me at the bottom of my own graph. A man descending is propelled by inertia; the only initiative left him is whether or not he decides to enjoy the passing scene."

The action of this story occurs at a New Year's Eve party, where Ed's attempts to kill time compound his woes.

He gets involved in a political argument that sours the mood of the guests against him. His inebriation pushes him into picking a quarrel with his wife's lover. The result is a knockdown and a battering for him and a subdued but remorseful ending.

The same Ed is at the core of the final story — only this time he is in a classic voyeur's stationing — a park bench on a weekday. His impulse to be a passive observer of the passing scene yields a momentary peacefulness until personal reality breaks into this lulling tranquility when he spots his own wife jogging in the park. This releases a flood of autobiographical revelations about the state of their union and respective psyches, and the general tone of the story is established.

Literary Precedents

The short story "Sam, Soren, and Ed" is a prelude to the novel My Present Age (1984). Two of the most entertaining characters from the novel make their first appearance here: Benny, the bourgeois lawyer who handles divorce proceedings for Ed's wife, Victoria; and Victoria herself, a rather righteous, sexy, determined woman. But the two most important abstract influences in this story — and again they anticipate their own magnifications in the novel — are Kierkegaard and Sam Waters (the "Soren" and "Sam" of the title) — the former being the gloomy philosophic touchstone for Ed; the latter being the projection for Ed's wish-fulfillment fantasies. Where Kierkegaard's journals breed Ed's pessimistic worldview, Sam Waters, the Western hero in Ed's own creative writing, is a remedy for the modern age's malaise. However, by the end of this story, Ed confesses that Kierkegaard is slowly supplanting Sam Waters as his guide through life's pitfalls. He proposes to finish his Sam Waters book and chooses an epigraph from Kierkegaard. This quotation is also his apology to his former wife and his admission that she was right all along, because it admits to the various excuses and evasions that have their being between a person's understanding and his act of willing.

The amazing thing about the Ed stories is not simply the brilliant control of the prose, but the remarkable way in which Vanderhaeghe takes stock characters — the sensuous wife, the aggrieved husband, the cuckold, the Western hero — and explores the tangle of modern life.

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994