

Mystery Stories

David Helwig

The Porcupine's Quill (November 2010)

Softcover \$27.95 (269pp)

978-0-88984-337-0

"It is a human weakness, remembering," says the narrator of "Stitches in Air," one of twelve tales in David Helwig's collection, all of which revolve around the issue of memory. Every character suffers a loss that leaves wounds—deep cuts that heal poorly, if at all—and as they struggle to come to grips with how to go on, they must also wrestle with their ghosts, delving into the past to learn what shapes the present, what fates they have managed to escape, and what lessons they can never forget.

Helwig was born in 1938 and has written and published numerous pieces of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry since his undergraduate years. A former teacher, he also founded the annual *Best Canadian Stories*, and his work speaks to the breadth of his knowledge, both of literature and of the human condition. From the man who gets constant phone calls for a doctor he does not know, to the girl who photographs herself in disguises and posts them on her website, the characters in these stories probe the depths of mankind's loneliness, how much (and sometimes how little) one does in an attempt to lessen the ache.

In "An Act of Oblivion," the narrator says, "Life is not comedy or tragedy but archaeology, a poking about in the middens for fragments, what's left." Most people do not see their lives as a continuous filmstrip, but rather, a series of snapshots, and these characters are desperate to put theirs in order. The narrator of "Stitches in Air" describes the lace for which the story is named: "A fabric that is defined by what is missing, a pattern fabricated around empty space." These stories hinge on what remains unsaid, and while some lack a sense of wholeness and of closure, this is also the nature of life—how much hangs in the ether, all the threads that dangle just beyond one's grasp.

One of several narrators of "La Rue du Chapeau Perdu" says of a memory, "Sometimes when he recalled it, the pain was like something suffered in a dream or a story. Sometimes. Equally often it was bare and wretched and close." These stories tell of lives laid bare, so wretched and close that the reader feels his own wants and worries swimming around inside them. This, the narrator of "Missing Notes" says, is "the nature of ghosts. The voices of other times, the past, the future, the voice of desire, plain and hidden, the fears which were desire in dark clothing."

JESSICA HENKLE (February 10, 2011)

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