



Softie: Stories

Megan Howell

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Megan Howell's *Softie* is a series of thirteen short stories which plumb the harrowing struggles and dark corners of womanhood and girlhood as “all hell breaks loose” with regularity.

Firm and unflinching, the stories navigate heavy themes—including teenage pregnancy, abuse, poverty, suicide, and sexual violence—from intimate perspectives, trapping attention within their characters' hardships. Herein, jaded narrators struggle and rage against the brokenness of their societies and families until reaching their boiling points. Their bleak and unrelenting circumstances are lightened by keen observations, as with “sometimes when he talked, he got so invested that spittle formed in the corner of his mouth.”

These stories know that no one chooses from a slate of limitless options and that people's behaviors and actions are patterned by their environments, childhoods, and applied systemic pressures. Reflective of this, the narratives are steeped in realities including poverty, racial inequity, and generational trauma—elements only sometimes brought to the fore of the prose, though they are omnipresent in the slow, menacing strictures that hem characters in. Economic pressures face a teacher turned nanny for a man who ages in reverse when he gets upset in “Vacuum Cleaner” and for a divorcee in “The Upstairs People,” pushing them and other women into fraught situations beyond their control. Oppressive, claustrophobic, and bitter tones are present in all but a few stories, as with the outstanding entry “Vacuum Cleaner,” which turns toward magical and absurd realms for a welcome change of pace, helping to balance the book's atmosphere out.

Cynical, envious, and resentful characters populate the resonant short stories of *Softie*, in which those who face the darkest parts of themselves can reach catharsis.

SÉBASTIEN LUC BUTLER (November / December 2024)

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