

Four Stories and Their Poems by Don Schaeffer: Reviewed by David Fraser

In *Four Stories and Their Poems*, Don Schaeffer depicts three characters, Jacob, Morely and Moshe, who are searching through the remnants of their lives and their ideas. Jacob in the story, "When Marcie Died", is attempting to define death. He knows of death, since in a lifetime it has been all around him, but he doesn't know it in terms of his perception and his identity. Like all of us, once we know death, it's too late to communicate it to anyone.

There is a sense of loneliness in his characters in each story. Jacob feels the need for people to join together, to be voices together, to have eyes to witness and share together. We see Jacob's trapped existence, living with cats who are oblivious, who live their own lives in and around him as he goes about the routine of rising, brushing his aging teeth, and taking a daily shower. He is "a strange non-participating man, speaking an odd idiosyncratic language" and as an aged man, he becomes a person without a voice where "the routes to sunshine are cut off because he speaks."

The poems between the stories thematically enhance the mood and message of each preceding story.

"small and selfish/. . ./I sit and wait/not knowing what to do."

– "The Creaking"

"When you refuse and disagree,/the light of the world/diminishes . . ."

– "Social Media"

In the story, "Two Dreams" we find a sense of alienation with the character, Moshe. He is "half visible" shuffling "among creatures with raised eyes and straight determined looks." He is a ghost "not speaking up, not saying hello," and "not knowing how to make his voice call up his visibility." Moshe "never felt a hero in his own house" because of a career "marred by personal flaws." He walks among shadows and he, himself is a shadow in a hollow world from which he has withdrawn.

The poems echo the alienation and the coldness of the world around him.

"They had dinner in the plastic cafeteria,
fitted to look like Acapulco,
which they would never see"

- "Wednesday Night Out"

and

"He cooperated with less than a whole heart,
half visible because
he couldn't take it for granted.
So the world never fully paid him."

- "Moshe"

Morely, a character in "The Complete Introvert", likes to roll his eyes inside himself much to the annoyance of his wife, Jodi. The world he sees is full of tunnels; tunnels connecting buildings, connecting the natural world through its root system, tunnels inside his body, tunnels through his mother's house, and through the air which are the passageways of escape.

In the poem "Quantum Foam" passageways or tunnels are the archetypal entrance ways and exits for birth and death.

In a sense the musings of Morely, the introvert, touch on metaphoric imagery. With tunnels we can't help thinking of worm holes through space and time, liminal spaces and thresholds that go beyond the mundane existence of eating supper and doing dishes.

In the final story, "The Inverse Performer", Moshe Goldberg rents an old theatre for three nights and pays each audience member a hundred dollars to listen, or if not listen, be present so he can affirm his existence with the dramatic presentation of his ideas. There is a fourth wall, that wall that separates the audience from the actor and the play that is not broken in this contrived scenario. The audience is a vague presence in the dark, separated from a mostly darkened stage and separated from the artist who is on the stage philosophizing metaphysically about existence and the great questions of life. The set-up for the three nights is as if quantum theory gets discussed by the right brain and the results are surreal as in a Samuel Beckett play.

Each story stands on its own, but each also layers on the others its tone of sadness and alienation, and the poems structurally bind the prose together in their concise glue.