

Review: *Songs for the Deaf* by John Henry Fleming

Review by B.A. Varghese

At first, John Henry Fleming's *Songs for the Deaf* seems like an eclectic collection of stories about strange characters—a prophet foresees the future by reading the clouds, a charming loser perseveres under the most unlucky of circumstances, a teenage boy rises above his adversaries and is deified by his followers after a victorious basketball game, a guilt-ridden driver befriends a floating hitchhiker, a father attempts to strengthen the bonds of his family by forcing them to face death while climbing Mount Everest together, a woman seeks love at a golf course near the Taj Mahal, a town is in uproar over a lust-inducing alien, a young man laments with his hospitalized brother in hope that the wind will stop their rain, and an operatic prodigy tries to win the heart of a deaf girl with his melodious voice. But with each story, a reader begins to feel a thread that binds them all together in a marvelous tapestry of hope, love, and the human spirit.

Folktales or fairytales are owned and passed down by a community of people, yet these modern stories seem to come alive on the page through a scribe of a forgotten race. Through Fleming's mastery of storytelling and poetic prose style, the reader is immersed in a wonderful world of wit and imagination straddling between misfortune and comedy. Stories like "A Charmed Life" beautifully captures the comic side of a protagonist's hardship. Fleming writes each story with a supernatural quality and grounds them with peculiar earthly characters resulting in an amazing book of tales with a modern mythic feel. At the end, a reader cannot help but feel that these stories may have been true at one time and only embellished with each passing generation's retelling.

The crescendo of this book is the story “Song for the Deaf” in which deputy Sheriff Jeremy Jones wants to inflict retribution on an egotistical prodigy, Tony Sutter, whose voice has captured the heart of the locals in his small town. Only Jones knows the damage Sutter’s voice has caused in the past and cannot understand everyone’s infatuation with him. But at the moment when Jones has a chance to end Sutter’s singing, he resists:

He’d devoted his entire youth to his hatred of Tony Sutter, and yet here he was on the verge of giving up, wishing despite himself for the serenade to work, for the deaf girl to curl her fingers around the thin white curtains until the light captured her astonished blue eyes and made the whole town fall in love.

Fleming captures Jones’ tortured spirit and moves us to stand alongside Sutter in a hope that the deaf girl will hear his voice’s ethereal beauty. It is in this story that we, as readers, lose ourselves in Fleming’s magical prose and yearn along with Jones and Sutter to see a sign that the deaf girl finally hears her song.

Songs for the Deaf by John Henry Fleming.
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