



The Melancholy of Departure: Stories (Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction Ser.)

Alfred DePew

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Filled with sharp dialogue, engaging characters, and offbeat detail, the twelve stories collected in *The Melancholy of Departure* describe an outsider's world of longing, disillusion, and survival, where hope is found in unexpected places and understanding comes from unlikely sources.

In "Hurley," the title character is a would-be revolutionary who unsuccessfully tries to explain "the difference between erotica and violence against women" to a clerk at a pornography shop called The Fifth Wheel. "Florence Wearnse" centers on a spinster of the World War I generation who goes deaf "to escape the listening, so tired had she grown of stocks and bonds, whooping cough, motor cars, weddings, the Kentucky Derby." A bizarre friendship between a former psychiatric war orderly with an interest in sadism and an obese mental patient who sublimates his needs by eating lemon meringue pie is featured in "Ralph and Larry."

As the title of the collection suggests, many of the stories deal with loss or failed relationships. In "Voici! Henri!," a story set in Paris, an aging Englishman contemplates life without his young lover, Henri, who has left Switzerland with a wealthy baron. "Let Me Tell You How I Met My First Husband, the Clown!" is a bittersweet remembrance of a Jewish woman's first marriage to "Daniel Muldoon: One-Man Flying Circus," a man she believes was "a sort of Ba'al Shem Tov with laughing children on his shoulders, a man whom God has put on this earth to show us the study of Talmud was not the only path."

"At Home with the Pelletiers" chronicles the disintegration of a St. Louis family after the oldest son, Walter, returns home from Marine Corps boot camp during the Vietnam War. Younger brother Howard prefers the Jane Fonda he sees on the nightly news to the actress who played Barbarella and feels uncomfortably at odds with the militaristic Walter, whose stories about war atrocities and sex Howard finds frighteningly similar.

Fully aware of the dangers that await us all?loneliness, commitment, heartbreak, love?the men and women in this collection call out to us from the fringes of society; they are prophets whose messages fall on uninterested ears.

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