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BOOKS!

Review by Lee Williams

A Handbook for Drowning
David Shields
Knopf, 1992
\$19.00

David Shields is a writer of few words. The Seattle author drew coast-to-coast praise for his first novel, *Dead Languages*, which conveyed both humor and heartache in a sharp, minimalist style.

A Handbook for Drowning, Shield's new collection, confirms his ability to tell a meaningful tale in as few words as possible.

Handbook's 24 stories revolve around one main character, Walter, and they offer quick glimpses of his life growing up in the late 1960s, and his attempts at relationships with his girlfriend, his terminally ill mother and his embittered and demanding father.

As short as they are, most of these pieces do come off with an amazing amount of emotional pull, and the sparse style heightens each story's intensity. Shield's bare-bones approach works best in stories like "The Imaginary Dead Baby Seagull," "Sudden Affection" and "War Wounds," which are small, understated life-events that carry immense meaning for Walt.

But some of the pieces are cut just too close. "Northern Lights," "The Heroic Mode" and "Father's Day" are pared down to mere character sketches; and thus, Walter's revelations seem incomplete or trivial.

And a byproduct of Shields' minimalism is a forced kind of symbolism that finds its way uncomfortably into stories like "The War on Poverty." In "Poverty," Walt's white, liberal mother eases the family conscience by hiring a black maid,

coincidentally, just as the family dog is introduced — "a black and white mutt."

Stylistic shortcomings aside, however, *A Handbook for Drowning* is still worth its (brief) reading time. The majority of pieces — probably 18 of the 24 — work well enough to form an interesting, if not in-depth glance into Walt's curious psyche. This may not be the ratio for a perfect short story collection, but for a good, fast read, it's more than the minimum requirement.

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