

Of Dogs and Men

Haunted by literary ghosts

THE STORY OF EDGAR SAWTELLE, fiction by David Wroblewski. Ecco, 2008. Hardcover, \$25.95.

In *Hamlet*, a young prince must deal with an existential crisis combined with the driving need for revenge, some of which he exacts with words. But what about a Hamlet so fully confronting his mortality and the pain of being human that he literally couldn't speak?

David Wroblewski's new (and first) novel, *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*, has elicited yawns of joy about "the best read of the summer" from numerous reviewers. That's understandable: He employs exquisite language, along with a sensitive but robust depiction of the almost magical authority invested in language choice, to explore human-animal and human-human relationships within the stark, sometimes brutal landscape near Lake Superior in Wisconsin's boreal forest. The plot plays against a most literary background, with shades of *Oedipus*, *The Jungle Book* and, overwhelmingly, *Hamlet*.

Rich and rounded, the book provides a

meditation on grief and growing up, on the violence of family and most wrenchingly on the faithfulness and loyalty of dogs. The mute boy of the title grows up on a farm near Mellen, Wisc., where his parents continue the work of his grandfather: making a breed of dog so brilliant, so well-trained, so bonded to humans that each dog becomes a true guardian and best friend, far beyond what any other dog has ever been.

These "Sawtelle dogs" don't all look alike and don't all come from the same breed, but they have expert training and consciousness. The Sawtelles keep meticulous records on bloodlines, and Edgar's father Gar, like his father before him, will take dogs back from people who don't deserve them. "We're not selling dogs," Edgar's mother tells him soon

after Gar dies. What they're selling instead becomes clear to Edgar once he's outside the protective circle provided by his mother and father.

Speaking of Gar's death, as experienced *Hamlet* readers may imagine, it's not entirely natural — though it certainly appears that way. Fourteen-year-old Edgar

and his mother Trudy attempt to keep up the business despite their grief, but soon enough, running the farm and kennels becomes too much for them. They need the arms and dog-knowledge of Gar's estranged younger brother Claude to keep the place going. Edgar, who has made only one or two sounds in his life, can't convey his dislike for and distrust of Claude in words, and Claude can't read Edgar's signs or sign back; this literal inability to communicate means that Claude can never understand Edgar.

Nor does Edgar really understand Claude. What's motivating him? What caused Claude and Gar to dislike each other so much that Gar kicked him off the farm a mere few months after Claude's nigh-on prodigal return? And do the stories Claude tells about Gar's cruelty hold a grain of truth? Fragmentary tales of Claude's younger days slowly reveal his streak of brutality and a strong desire to control decisions about life and death. But Edgar doesn't learn all of these stories; he's left with little information, and a resented, loved, terrifying specter of his father, to help him figure out what he should do. The first appearance of that father's ghost, by the way, could be the most beautiful and harrowing haunting ever

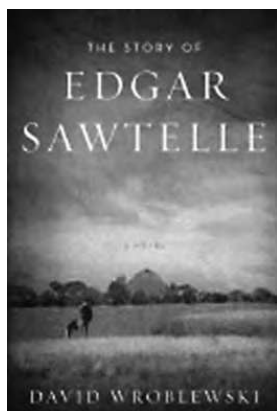
written.

Wroblewski plays a little with *Hamlet*-loving readers. For instance, when Trudy decides something Edgar doesn't like, the boy realizes that there's no way to change her mind once she turns "imperial." One chapter, as Edgar and faithful retainers wander in the wilderness, is titled "Pirates." The play-within-a-play scene couldn't be more inspired or eerie, but much of the rest, including the identity and destiny of Edgar's Ophelia, require more subtle understanding.

Hamlet circumscribes the plot in a few odd

ways, but who cares? Wroblewski's talents lie in scene-setting, in writing about how the things people love define their lives, in transmitting fear and rage and loneliness. Like the characters in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Jeux Sont Fait*, Edgar chooses to try despite impossible odds. In the end, man is far worse than wolf to man — and boy. Going to the dogs comes to be the only rational choice. If only Edgar could make it. **EW**

David Wroblewski reads at 7:30 pm Thursday, July 10, at Powell's on Burnside in Portland. And don't miss local authors in a 4 pm Friday, July 4, gala poetry reading and art opening with George Hitchcock, Marjorie Simon, Cecelia Hagen and Clem Starck, at Tsunami Books.



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