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Book Review

Dancing After Hours, by Andre Dubus (Alfred A. Knopf: New York) 1996. 234 pages, \$23.00. Reviewed by James Schaap, Professor of English.

Andre Dubus deserves a special place in heaven, and the reasons are legion. Let's begin here: a humility that's evinced in his dedication to what's eternal but elusive in the dimly-lit New England landscape he's made familiar to his readers. There's a certain sameness to his work, as if he were forever on bended knee before that which he always wants to get right, what he's wanted to do since the seventies, in a half dozen previous collections of masterful short stories.

But to suggest his work hasn't matured and ripened is wrong. In this collection, the presence of the eternal is closer, perhaps, than it has ever been before to his people, characters he knows as if they were fellow stool-sitters, elbows up on the bar. They're seekers, all of them, even if few actually find what's out there.

In *Dancing After Hours*, his first new collection in ten years, darkness still lies all around; but somewhere on the horizon, the grays are lifting slowly; and that's where he's perched, where he's always been, at the elusive seam between chaos and meaning. Humility, real humility, is not simply knowing that you don't know, but believing, however sheepishly, that something or someone does, a realization that grows into the conviction to keep looking yourself.

His world is New England, but his characters seem related to, but not as limited as, Ray Carver's Pacific Northwest blue-collar stragglers. There are links between his world and that of the minimalists, but the grit often seems at least backlit in Dubus's settings, because somewhere unseen a divine presence glows over what otherwise would seem only dirty realism. His refusal to be bullied by life's bleakness is another reason he deserves a reserved place in heaven. In Dubus's work, where love is always at stake, someone is forever yearning for the light she believes has to be there.

And here's another reason for a special place. Andre Dubus is a hero. In 1986, he left his car to investigate an accident, and just a few minutes later found himself the victim of another, when a car came up from behind. One of his legs was amputated, the

other badly mangled. That story is significant not only because his injury was, but because this new collection is full of people with bad or missing limbs—paraplegics and even quadriplegics. Most often, these survivors possess a spiritual wisdom that others often need. Often enough, they are Samaritans.

The title story begins in broad strokes like many others: "Emily Moore was a forty-year old bartender in a town in Massachusetts." For the most part, Dubus' protagonists are of an age when, by life's experience, they've found youthful idealism to be little more than fancy. Emily, like others, has loved and lost; and having lost, she's begun to wonder whether investing again is worth her time and energy. She wishes she "were not so cautious, or disillusioned." She's come to believe that "love did not bring happiness, it did not last, and it ended in pain."

At the beginning of the story she stands outside the bar, smelling the ocean like so many of Dubus's searchers, when a van drives up and a man in a wheelchair exits, once the lift inside delivers him to the parking lot. His driver is not simply the nurse, but someone who's made his job a calling. Once the two of them enter, Emily's place won't be the same. This story, the longest in the book, is composed in large part of an ongoing dialogue between the wounded, a conversation over drinks that doesn't end when the bar closes, but continues lovingly into a dance of deep and affirmative meaning.

To Emily, who gave up teaching high school kids when she began feeling like "a woman standing at a roadside, reading poems aloud into the wind as cars filled with teenagers went speeding by," Drew, the quadriplegic, is a blessing. She sees his joy, even in pain, and realizes very slowly that she's been wrong to retreat from life and love. "She was not afraid of pain; she was tired of it; and sometimes she thought being tired of it was worse than fear, that losing fear meant she had lost hope as well."

It's that kind of tiredness that characterizes so many of the characters in these stories, a kind of psychic old age. Many of them are veterans of the Sixties

excesses, a time, Dubus says in an earlier story, "when courting had given way to passion, and passion burned without vision." Collectively, they've lost often, not so much by way of fear, but from overinvestment, from moving too far, too fast. In the story which comes closest to sentimentality in the collection, "All the Time in the World," Luann Arceneaux, also emotionally tired, meets a war vet with a bum leg, falls deeply for him the first time they are together, but that night, on her doorstep, tells him, "Not yet." He says, "That's good."

There's darkness galore in these stories. Sadness is etched into every forehead. But in Dubus there's always a sense that somewhere out there things are worth knowing, worth feeling, worth doing. Happiness isn't simply illusion, even if the light at the end of a long tunnel is hardly blinding.

What separates Dubus from Carver in his earliest, starkest stories is not so much an attention to detail as a view of the human character. What Dubus obviously believes is that the patrons of his little off-the-road hangouts really seek something elusive, and that every last one of them possesses something eternal himself or herself, some destiny, some mark of divinity. His people have lived in darkness; they've messed up, and they continue to feel their way around a world that offers little meaning. But his people retain something which makes them worth our time. What they have is a vision, the not-to-be-denied belief that there is more to life than what they've yet seen. That hope makes them all, finally, tender and sympathetic, because, at least in part, they are as human as any of us.

Emily, from the title story, senses what she wants, knows it well enough to define it by the memory of a moment when she witnessed a blind jazz musician lead a dance that brought every last patron of a night

club into joy amid the gloom: "It would be something like that," she thought now, "something ineffable that comes from outside and fills us; something that changes the way we see what we see; something that allows us to see what we don't." That's what she decides to keep pursuing.

Ray Carver and others ignited a short story boom in the mid 80s, a boom that since has flattened once again, so it's likely that *Dancing After Hours* won't be a blockbuster. Others have speculated on why readers in a short-winded society won't adopt the short story form, but after reading this collection I believe there's an element we've not considered.

Many claim the art of short fiction is more demanding than the novel. It is, I think. When short stories are crafted as perfectly as so many of Dubus's are, then reading an entire collection makes incredible demands on us, moving as we do so deeply into the lives of his characters in so short a time. In *Dancing After Hours*, almost every story is as complex as a novel, a life-breathing narrative that shimmers with emotional honesty as it moves quickly and inexorably toward a tempered completeness. It's difficult moving quickly from one story into the next.

Dubus is always subtle and never preachy. While he brings us closer to life's seaminess than some of us might care to venture, he is certainly one of the finest of America's religious writers. Perhaps we damn with faint praise when we say it that way; he'd likely prefer no adjectives. But he is, certainly, a man in whose work grace abounds.

He deserves a special place in heaven, and maybe I shouldn't say it, but I will anyway: the spot he gets won't be a parking stall for the physically handicapped, because there will be no more prostheses when the roll is called up yonder, thank goodness. My guess is, he knows that, well and good.