*Woman, Running Late, in a Dress*, by Dallas Woodburn review by John Abbasi

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*Woman, Running Late, in a Dress* by Dallas Woodburn is a collection of short stories in which the author explores relationships of all kinds. The stories center around the deep, and often traumatic, impact of failed relationships, death and mental illness. Though these themes may appear familiar, Woodburn’s stylish prose and willingness to explore the inner pain of her main characters elevates this collection to a level of outstanding literary complexity.

 A particularly refreshing and engaging aspect of this collection is the author’s use of change. Many authors have their characters stuck in ruts or negative situations which become their norm. In those types of stories, we get to know the character’s ongoing issues and quickly become immersed in those problems. This can often lead to the character feeling stuck, which can have the same impact on the reader. We certainly don’t want to feel as though we are trudging through characters’ emotional and mental mud when we read stories. Woodburn avoids this by creating tensions that challenge the characters’ norms. In fact, many of her stories center around changes that throw off relationship and family dynamics.

 Take, for example, the opening story of the collection, “Near-Death Experience.” It focuses on the first-person perspective of a wife dealing with her husband who had a stroke and then suddenly found the Christian faith. Woodburn successfully gets us in the mind of the main character by intimately describing her relationship with the husband before and after the stroke. She transforms the husband from strong, reckless and passionate about their relationship, to fanatically Christian and obsessed with his faith. The character holds onto her old feelings of the man she married while wrestling with the idea that he is gone. The author even tackles the guilt the character feels, in retrospect, as she wishes the husband would have died after his stroke. This is the exact type of change in Woodburn’s stories that unsettles the character and strips away their emotional and logical base. This, in turn, creates a wonderful sense of uncomfortable tension for the reader that drives the stories deeper into the psyche of the characters.

 As Woodburn navigates through her emotionally scarred and deep-thinking characters, some highly creative and imaginative twists arise. The collection really takes flight with “Slowly, Slowly Without Much Notice.” In this story, Woodburn shows off a more imaginative and metaphorical side of her writing while focusing on her usual thematic content. It is about a family of three with a late high school-aged son, and a mother and father who seem to have lost their spark. The story unfolds in just 10 pages with tightly-packed, detailed prose that navigates, in third-person, from family member to family member. At just the right moments we are given detail about the mother having an episode, something like a panic attack, that changed everything. The family dynamics were totally turned upside down after this. Again, beautifully implemented change is at the forefront of the tension. The twist here is that there are brief, yet evocative, first-person sections that deviate from the main story. These happen concurrently with the main storyline and are marked by specific times in the evening. Without giving away too much, the first-person perspective turns out to be a totally impactful “character” that shocks both the family and the reader.

 Woodburn’s collection gets inside of the characters’ minds, brings the reader close to their perspectives and challenges our expectations with her unpredictable plot progressions. The irresistible and inevitable changes her characters experience unsettle the reader in the best way possible. Her stories speak to the complexity in humanity and relationships, while her tightly-woven prose and flourishing visual details bring her characters and situations to life. This is a must-read for those seeking patient, impactful fiction that provides an excellent example of the intermingling of close characterization and tension brought about by change.