*Thirty-Seven,* by Peter Stenson reviewed by Taylor Croft

Dzanc Books

*Thirty-Seven* is a new novel by author Peter Stenson, who received his MFA from Colorado State University in 2012. In addition to *Thirty-Seven,* Stenson has written *Fiend* as well as multiple stories and essays, some of which have been published in *The Bellevue Literary Review, The Greensboro Review, Confrontation*, and others. *Thirty-Seven* is novel about a young boy figuring out life after he leaves a cult-like group known as The Survivors. The group leader goes by the name One and believes that in sickness, a person bears honesty, and, in truth, a person can change. Undergoing ritualized Cytoxan and DMT treatments that leave the members sickly looking and brain washed, the Survivors participate in The Day of Gifts, a day of violence that disbands the group, some of them dying, some in prison, and in Mason’s case, damaged.

Mason Hues, the thirty-seventh member of the group and their only living and non-incarcerated member, is now trying to live his life outside of the cult. After an intense year of mental healing and counseling, Mason takes a job at a thrift shop, hoping to live a quiet and peaceful life as best as he can. But when his eccentric boss Talley learns of his past, she soon becomes inspired in the Survivor philosophy. She pushes Mason to teach her how to be like him, branding him as the new One.

The cast of characters within *Thirty-Seven* shows a wide variety. Mason, the young protagonist, is depicted as a guilt-driven and confused boy who strives to appease the people in his life as well as fill the hole of loneliness in his own life. His adoptive parents were loving and caring, but his father’s pedophiliac habits created a divide between them, causing Mason to strive for other motherly and fatherly figures. Dr. James Shepard, later known as One, filled this gap. His character is portrayed in two different lights; in flashbacks when Mason was in the cult and by Mason in the real world after the cult was disbanded. Mason viewed One as a compassionate man who truly cared about his people and believed in what he preached. One and the others gave Mason a family that truly loved him and each other, and he didn’t want this family to ever end, even if it meant killing others that put the Survivors at risk. The world however, saw Dr. Shepard as a sick, twisted man that deluded innocent people all the way to their deaths.

*Thirty-Seven* has an interesting structure in which there are footnotes that comment on the fictional book written in the world that exploits and documents all of the Survivor’s story and beliefs. Creating such a juxtaposed character impacts not only the characters within the novel, but the readers too. Humanizing the character One creates a sense of guilt inside the readers for liking him, making them culpable, as well. What further convinces the reader why people fall into cults is their beautiful family concept shown in the beginning and middle of the novel. One uses a phrase quite often that Mason uses in his time out of the cult to describe this feeling, “The real fear of standing on a cliff isn’t that you’ll fall, but that you’ll jump.”

Talley, Mason’s boss, is significant because she comes into Mason’s life after he gets out of the group. She is a loud, insecure woman who is searching for something more, just like Mason had been. She fills her life with drugs and alcohol and a rock band boyfriend that was never committed to her in the first place. All of this keeps her busy, but never fulfills her. Mason sees this, and her likability motivates him to make her feel complete, a little because he cares for her and a little because he craves the attention she gives him as well. The story takes an intense turn when Talley begins to call Mason “One” and herself “Two,” and takes him back to the mansion the Survivors stayed in. Here, Mason and Talley begin their new Survivor family, saving their heads at the spot where Mason has once committed himself to Dr. James Shepard. Their characters complement each other beautifully much like many other relationships in this novel, and Stenson should be commended for creating such a complex relationship.

Stenson uses a variety of techniques when it comes to language. Some main techniques that are utilized are repetition within rhythmic passages, and scenic moments of vivid imagery. There are several passages that hit readers hard with not only the tensions taking place to the character within the situations, but because of how they are written. Utilizing short and crass sentences that carry a refrain thus carries more impact at what’s being said. A specific example of this are the short, one page chapters that are all called “Sick,” numbered in roman numerals. These are highlighted moments in the story because being sick was a major point in the philosophy of the Survivors. These chapters use very poetic language to describe the violent expulsions that the drugs would inflict, “My body forced the lining of my stomach out of my mouth,” from the first Sick chapter and, “Drinking anything was paper cuts over exposed nerve endings,” from the second. Along with these passages, Stenson also creates these moments of beautiful disasters. Before the cult became extremely corrupt, there are multiple moments that take place in The Survivor’s mansion, while are terrible moments to the outside perspective, are written with beauty and fluidity. They generate a peaceful and healing tone, a place almost like a rehab center which, to One and the others, is essentially what the mansion is. Building a setting this way generated an amazing tonal complexity and challenges characters with more than just the situation they’re being placed in.

The significance of *Thirty-Seven* is how a person can relate to belonging and being loved. It plays on the human desire to belong to something greater than oneself, even risking self-delusion to achieve such aspirations. It’s a take on the human psyche, and a different perspective on what it’s like to be a member of a cult. This book is a fantastic read, and I’d recommend it to anyone and everyone.