*How to Make Paper When the World is Ending*,by Dallas Woodburn rev. by Mia Alvarez

Koehler Books

Dallas Woodburn is a writer of fiction, nonfiction, and plays. Her debut novel, *The Best Week That Never Happened*, was published in 2020 and was the Grand Prize Winner of the Dante Rossetti Book Award for Young Adult Fiction. A former John Steinbeck Fellow in Creative Writing, Woodburn has also received the Cypress and Pine Short Fiction Award, the international Glass Woman Prize, and four Pushcart Prize nominations. She is also a book coach and is passionate about helping other writers get their stories out and into the world. She has two books—a YA novel and a nonfiction book—forthcoming in 2023. Published in 2022, *How to Make Paper When the World is Ending* is a collection of short stories that reimagines and pushes the boundaries of what a ghost story can be and do.

*How to Make Paper When the World is Ending* is filled with ghosts, both literal and figurative. In one story, the narrator finds the ghost of her dead fiancé in her shower after he commits suicide. In another story, a woman tries to find hope in her new relationship as the world, due to climate change, is ending. In one of my favorites, a man tries to return his ex-girlfriend’s real, beating heart without a receipt after they break up. The stories explore themes of loss and hopelessness as characters try to find meaning in the confusion of their lives and in their grief, in the “blurred union” between the past and the present. A feeling of nostalgia imbues the stories, carrying tonal and emotional impact across the collection. In the titular story, this feeling of nostalgia and confused grief and hopelessness is created by the repetition of the italicized sections, which change each time they are repeated to take on a new or deeper meaning, to reveal something surprising and important. Repetition in this story creates a strong accumulation of tone, tension, and meaning that is enjoyable and engrossing to read.

Sometimes impact is carried out by just a few lines of powerful, surprising insight, like in this paragraph on page 117 of “The Man Who Lives in My Shower”:

I have a new saddest day now. And though the ring still clings to my finger, I don’t think of it as an engagement ring anymore. *Till death do us part.* What a silly promise, that death could part two people. Death means love grips tighter, suffocates, becomes spiderwebbed with regret. And regret is messy. It clings to you.

The figurative language, rhythm of sentences, and tone in this paragraph alone carry strong emotional impact.

Although the stories engage thematically with serious topics, there is a playfulness about the stories and the writing style which creates a pleasant tonal contrast. This playfulness is sometimes inherent in the conception of the stories, like in “Receiptless,” the story where the man returns his ex-girlfriend’s heart. It is also performed structurally in some stories, like in “How to Make Spinach-Artichoke Lasagna After Your Best Friend’s Funeral,” which is structured exactly how the title makes it sound, and in the first story of the collection, “Story to Tell Around a Campfire,” wherein the narrator imagines a story about a couple and how they would tell it differently depending on whether it were a romantic or a scary story. Ambiguity is used to an enjoyable end in this story, and there is also a meta quality about the story which is enjoyable to read also.

The stories in *How to Make Paper When the World is Ending* are imaginative, thoughtful,

grim, and playful. They exist in a sort of ghostly space of grief, nostalgia, and change, and it is entertaining to read as the characters navigate this nebulous landscape.