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Book Review - Hart, W. (2002) Never Fade Away

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Book Review

Hart, William (2002). *Never Fade Away*. Santa Barbara, CA: Fithian Press.

202 pp.

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Reviewed by

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It is no secret that valid and appropriate assessment methods are the subject of much debate these days, at least among the scholastic community, if perhaps less so for the politicians to whom the calamity of uninformed policy seems less clearly apparent. In this environment where the views of teachers and academics are too often overlooked and overruled, William Hart's tale of one English teacher speaking truth to power has been greeted with a flurry of gushing reviews.

Unfortunately, the list of literary and linguistic luminaries gilding the two full pages of endorsements inside my signed copy of *Never Fade Away* only served to deepen my eventual disappointment with this flawed novel.

Never Fade Away follows two semesters in the lives of Tina Le, a recent Vietnamese immigrant to California, and John Goddard, Vietnam veteran and English teacher, through entries to their respective writing journals. Readers witness the process of Tina's linguistic and cultural adjustments in parallel with John's struggles to prepare his international basic writing students for a killer essay final he suspects is intended by the administration to weed English as a Second Language students from the college. John's attempt to shield two of his best students (Tina is one) from the consequences of testing poorly puts him at odds with the administration, and it is around this conflict that the novel turns.

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As a recent graduate of a master's program in English as a Second Language (ESL), a current teacher in a college-level Intensive English Program (IEP), an Army veteran of the same age now as the male protagonist was then, and an opponent of high-stakes testing, it might seem that this novel would be tailored to my fit. Uneven characterization and a storyline to stretch credulity, however, ultimately sabotaged my efforts to suspend disbelief, despite siding with the character of John Goddard. I was reminded, as I read, of the guy who goes to see every martial arts movie that comes out because he is a practitioner of martial arts, then pretends that they were all good movies, or at least that he enjoyed them; I am not that guy.

To be fair, Hart does some things quite well. His portrayal of Tina's developing interlanguage certainly rings true; if her progress is perhaps optimistically quick, this can certainly be excused by the necessity to reflect change within the arc of the novel. Hart's deft portrayal of Tina Le's internal voice and emotional growth were for me the highlights of the book.

In the end, though, what might have been a compelling parallel tale of overcoming demons both present and past—institutional gatekeeping and violence suffered, for Tina Le; a broken assessment system and violence inflicted, for John Goddard—instead limps lopsidedly to a finish which is as unsatisfying as it is difficult to swallow.

William Hart

For me, there are two reasons that this book does not work.

Foremost, the character of John Goddard is initially so unappealing as to render the book a virtual non-starter. John Goddard's journal entries exhibit all the emotional range of battery acid, though with perhaps a shade less originality of expression. He is as hard boiled as he wants to be, but seems, inexplicably, to be putting on a show for an audience of one. I had had my fill of caustic posturing by page 2, and would not have continued, had I not previously agreed to review the book.

Suffering John's entries will eventually bring the patient reader to the second source of my frustration with this novel. The author's chosen resolution of the main conflict of the story is more than modestly difficult to believe. Despite countless pages spent building a compelling case for the overthrow of a patently unjust high-stakes assessment regime, Hart chooses to allow the status quo to prevail through the too-simple tactic of character assassination. In so doing, Hart solidifies Goddard's martyr credentials at the cost of the book's overall believability. For this reader, it is too high a price to pay. Choosing to allow the status quo to prevail on such a weak case, the author asks the reader to accept that the cartoonishly ugly administrative opposition would be supported by an apparently vacuous Grievance Committee, in contravention of student corroboration, press support, academically prepared statistical evidence, and even the explicit policies of the university itself. It simply rings false.

According to author William Hart (2004), the writing program and the administrative conflict at the heart of *Never Fade Away* loosely parallel events at a similar program where he worked while earning his PhD in English. Indeed, these real-life difficulties (and eventual success) in overhauling a defective writing program prompted the novel (Hart, 2004). If good sense could triumph in reality, then why not in this piece of fiction?

Despite a personal history, an academic training and even a demographic that would seem to predispose me to membership in the choir for which William Hart is preaching, I found this book hopelessly off key. Still, the book does work on some levels. Particularly for those in any of the interest groups represented (Vietnamese Americans, Vietnam veterans, English or English as a Second Language teachers, refugees, immigrants, victims of sexual violence, international students in the United States), the book may offer enough material with which to at least partially identify.

As a polemic, *Never Fade Away* might rise to the level of guilty pleasure. After all, who doesn't like to cheer a hero thumbing a nose at unjust authority? Unfortunately, the bad guys here are so obviously in the wrong that it feels like piling-on to support the hero. He shouldn't need our support against such a bumbling opponent, so it is that much more difficult to lend it.

As a paean to teachers everywhere struggling as student advocates in the face of ignorance, apathy, or worse, *Never Fade Away* may serve as an inspirational, if cautionary, tale. Unfortunately, it is hindered in this role by the triumph of the bumbling opponent. It is as if we are asked to remember an Alamo inexplicably overrun by the fluffier members of a petting zoo.

As a novel, then, *Never Fade Away* ultimately betrays the promise of both its endorsements and its title.

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About the Reviewer

James Knaack

James Knaack teaches American Culture in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at the University of Texas at San Antonio, as well as Content Based Reading for undergraduate and Advanced Reading Strategies for graduate students of the English for International Students (EIS) program. He holds a master's degree in Bicultural-Bilingual Studies from the University of Texas at San Antonio. James worked as a Korean linguist for the United States Army, and looks forward to returning to South Korea with his wife Rosie for teaching and research.

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