

Dalton sees the cost of choice

Collection of short stories filled with loss, tension, but also hope

Reviewed by Steve Cushman

STORIES FROM THE AFTERLIFE

By Quinn Dalton
Press 53. \$15.00.

The ten stories in Quinn Dalton's second collection of short fiction, "Stories from the Afterlife," are about the choices, and decisions, we make and what these choices ultimately cost us. Dalton is a Greensboro resident and graduate of UNCG's MFA program and the author of two previous books. Her stories in this new collection are filled with loss and longing, with sexual and racial tension, but these stories also offer hope as we see characters making decisions that will ultimately be the catalyst for change, propelling them into a new, and hopefully better, kind of life.

The first person narrator of "Jimmy the Brain and the Beautiful Aideen" is a college student who takes a job at the Beer Mart, a drive-through liquor store. He ends up falling in love with Aideen, the boss's wife and is surprised to hear her say that life is laid out for you, that you don't get to choose what you want, and there isn't much you can do about this. He disagrees with her at the time, but later as an adult, looking back, he says, "I know some people have to work in places like that, and some people choose to do it, like I did, telling myself nobody was going to kill me over a beer, as if my living through that time had been all up to me."

This is a beautiful story and a good example of Dalton's ability to portray her characters as tough, smart and vulnerable all at the same time. Toward the end of the story, the narrator says, "I want to walk with her (Aideen) behind the counter and sit her down under the heater and explain to her how to get out of this business, save her marriage, herself."

In "Five-Minute Man" we meet Charlie, whose life has taken a decidedly downward turn since he starred in an M&M commercial at the age of seven. Soon after the commercial, his parents split up. After dropping out of college, and that big break in acting never actually materializing, Charlie who is now in his thirties, works the sales counter at Camera Town. While he is not exactly satisfied with his life, things are moving along at a relatively quiet clip until two events come together to change everything for him: a newly divorced mother of three moves in next door and his father, whom he hasn't seen in twenty years, comes to town. By the end of the story Charlie will learn that he has to give something of himself if he ever wants to get close to anyone again.

"Trigger Finger" is narrated by an older black woman who was raped years earlier by a group of white men. Now her next door neighbor, a thirteen year old white girl, is pregnant. At night, the narrator can hear the girl's cries through thin walls. When the narrator realizes the awful truth of who the baby's father is, she is forced to make a stance that will forever change the pregnant girl's life as well as her own.

In “The Music You Never Hear,” Ned, a white traveling salesman sleeps with a black woman named Dobi whom he has hired to care for his dying wife. Dobi becomes pregnant and has his child. After Ned’s wife dies, he visits Dobi and their son every couple years until eventually Dobi moves away and Ned ends up in a nursing home. Near the end of his life, Ned decides to find Dobi and his son, in an effort to come to some sort of understanding of his life and what has happened. But when he finds them their response is not at all what he was expecting.

And in “Plot vs. Character” a soap opera TV writer has to decide whether or not to continue living in a way that mirrors the clichéd story lines she writes or to finally make a stand and choose a path she has never taken, a type of life and love that would not make the story line of a steamy soap opera.

Throughout, Dalton does a fine job of offering us fictional characters we grow to care about, even as we see them making mistakes and in some cases bad decisions. But that's one of the best things about fiction--although you know a character is doing something wrong, or making choices you may not agree with, it seems about the perfect, and only, thing for this person to do on this particular day. And this Quinn Dalton does time and time again with the ease and careful hand of an accomplished writer who continues to improve with each new book.

Steve Cushman works in the Radiology Department at Moses Cone Memorial Hospital and is the author of the novel Portisville.