The End of the Ice Age
by Terence Young

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

Terence Young’s The End of the Ice Age is a collection of twelve short stories about family dynamics and mid-life crises, bookended by two stories of not quite evading the knowledge of impending doom. The epigraph, “Gods – how the darkness gathers!,” from The Last Days of Pompeii, suggests that the book is not going to be a bundle of laughs; however, the stories do have a variety of bi-coastal settings and narrative voices ranging from those of teens to seniors. The string that keeps the rows parallel seems to be that most of the characters have no work to give their life structure and/or meaning. They are students or adults on vacation, unemployed, or retired. It is as if each story is an attempt to answer the father’s question in “Dream Vacation”: “It’s like your life is over. What are you going to do now?” (20)

“The Garden of the Fugitives” is stylistically perhaps the most complex of the stories, with several characters – father, mother, sister Jane, narrator Blair and his girlfriend Kate, and younger brother Cam and his new fiancée Sophie. The story centres on a dysfunctional family near Boston sending letters of disapproval over to Europe with Blair to try to intervene in Cam’s spontaneous engagement. The parents are not the “unconditional love” ideal. Blair describes them as controlling their children by “disaffection”: “The threatened withdrawal of their love was a weapon” (40–41). Before he can get on the plane, Blair is in an accident that leaves him in a coma for six months. His forced withdrawal from the tangled garden seems to reconfigure the family. So the writer has used plot to initiate character development, to inform theme. He also uses symbolism, the disputed meaning of a holiday snapshot of Pompeii, to suggest that this family may still be just as petrified as the one in the Garden of the Fugitives – “parents and children taking shelter against a wall in the orchard while the sky is raining down fire and ash upon their heads” (49).

Young also makes effective use of detail to suggest character transformation. In “The End of the Ice Age,” the 37-year-old narrator who thinks everyone is older than he is has found a more mature loving partner. She reflects to him the pivotal story of his life, his childhood fear of the law school for the law school students, which it seems he has misheard as “lost” school and “lost” students. As he uses the blow dryer to clear the bathroom mirror, “He liked to watch the steam retreat across the surface of the glass, a time-lapse recreation of the end of the ice age” (61). The image suggests that things can warm up, that there is hope of growth even for delayed adolescents, for adult children.

Two stories told by teens, “Suburbs Going Down” and “Rumours of Human Sacrifice,” ask who will look after the abandoned children of divorce. The challenges of adjusting to monogamy and suburbia are explored in “Fair Enough,” “Fair Market Value,” “Infestation,” and “That Time of Year.” The difficulties moving from adolescent to adult responsibilities underlie “Mole” and “The Big Money.”

In the final story, “Last of the Silent Movies,” Avril sets up two of her clients with a celebratory meal for their sixtieth wedding anniversary only to find that the husband has timed it to coincide with a planned murder/suicide. As she watches Charlie Chaplin’s black sheep among the flock in
Modern Times, the Palmers are sitting on the balcony railing ready to float backwards down into the heather. Avril’s reality, lost within a piece of art with an evocative title, is entangled with the couple’s reality in the imagery, the sheep and the heather.

In the same way that the end of the ice age can also imply melting ice caps and drowned coastlines, it is possible that these are stories about aging told from an adolescent viewpoint and that Young may be demonstrating how people delude themselves. However, although the collection seems haunted by the spectre of dying, the gathering darkness is not always death itself. Perhaps “littler deaths,” losing innocence, or escaping extended adolescence (into delayed maturity), or finding meaning in work, or maturing libido, leave some room for seeds of hope to survive, for a fleeting happiness to flourish.

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