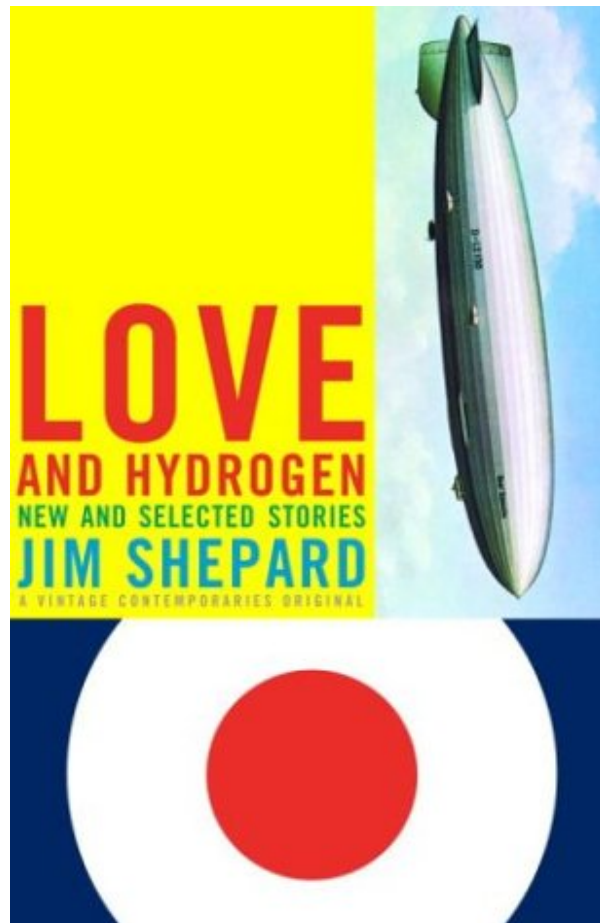
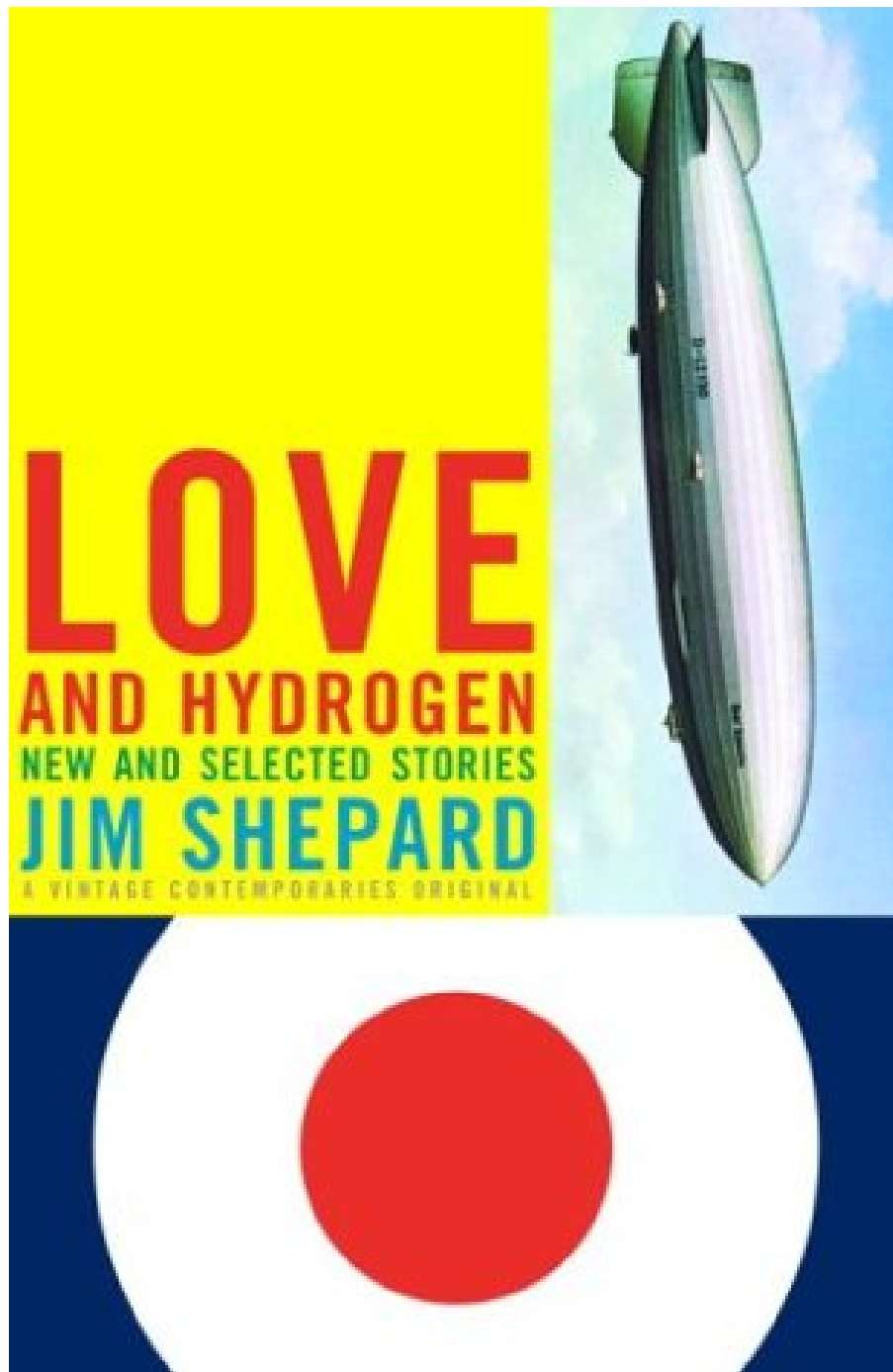


LOVE AND HYDROGEN: NEW AND SELECTED STORIES BY JIM SHEPARD



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Shepard: Hedgehog

By Patrick Mc Coy

I think Isaiah Berlin's classification of writers as hedgehogs (those who have one great theme) and foxes (those who have many themes) can be a useful classification of writers. Jim Shepard is definitely a fox. In this collection, *Love and Hydrogen*, much like last year's Pulitzer Prize nominated collection *Like You'd Understand* is a dizzying array of original and inventive stories. There are quirky tales of dysfunctional families: "gun lobby," "Runway," and "The Morality of Parents." He has a number of sports related stories, some of which infuse historical events into them like "Batting Against Castro" (about baseball and politics in pre-revolution Cuba) as well as "Ajax Is All About Attack" (which is about 60s politics in The Netherlands and soccer). One of Shepperd's greatest strengths is the adolescent coming of age story: "Mars Attacks," "Glut Your Soul On My Accursed Ugliness," "and "Spending The Night With The Poor." It is also apparent that Shepperd often infuses his stories with scientific or historical research: gay Nazis in love in a zeppelin ("Love and Hydrogen"), WWII battles behind occupied lines ("The Assassination of Reinhard Heydad"), deep sea exploration ("descent into Perpetual Night") and exploration of uncharted lands ("Astounding Stories") to name a few of his forays into history and science. I'd like to read one of his novels and see how he manages to sustain a story into a longer narrative.

13 of 14 people found the following review helpful.

We have become the inexplicable

By tom nguyen

Reading Jim Shepard's *'Love and Hydrogen'* right after Adam Haslett's overwrought and over-rated *'You Are Not a Stranger Here'* was what I needed to re-affirm my faith in short fiction as an art form. As a reader I want a fulfillment of what fiction promises: a mimesis; that the author will try to inhabit other lives and situations and render them in a way that produces something novel for me. I don't need self-affirmation or a lesson. I want a story. And in a short story collection I want stories. Many times, such as in Haslett's book, the situations are so repetitive that you suspect that the author is rendering his own life through these stories, that self-indulgence and egotism over-ride art or any interest in art. Sorry for writing of my opinion of Haslett's work, but it brought into stark contrast why I liked this collection so much more.

Shepard's work is most notable for its incredible diversity of setting, voice and theme: a teen-age girl's first person account of a friendship strained by class division (*Spending the Night With the Poor*), the disaffections and fascination of a Yugoslav footballer in progressive 1960's Holland (*Ajax is All About Attack*), the thrill and resignation of a World War II German test pilot (*Climb Aboard the Mighty Flea*) are just a sample. He can approach a story as a straight ahead narrative (*The Mortality of Parents*) or as an ironic romp(*The Creature from the Black Lagoon*) and yet he always seems to find his way to the dark heart of the story. He is at his best when he takes on narratives or personae that we think we know and produces something startlingly fresh: *'We Won't Get Fooled Again'* a brief history of The Who from the eyes of their most enigmatic member, bassist John Entwistle, is hilarious and heart-rending.

Nor is Shepard ideologically bound; in his exceptional story *'John Ashcroft: More Important Things Than Me'* he paints a self-portrait of the man that is at once more generous and chilling than any number of partisan biographies could hope to accomplish. Characters who would be no more than walk-ons or caricatures in another writer's story take centre-stage with Shepard, and you get the feeling that no character is automatically invested with more insight or dignity than any other. In all, it is a refreshing approach and

one that declares a fuller, more humanistic artistic vision than ninety percent of the reheated autobiographies that masquerade as fiction today. The only weak point I found in the collection was 'Alicia and Emmet with the 17th Lancers at Balaclava' where the interweaving narratives felt somewhat strained. It is a minor drawback, like a complaint about the scuff-marks on Fred Astaire's floor.

At first this incredible array of voices and settings may seem like a self-conscious tour de force, that the author is trying to keep you on your heels with off-speed pitches because he doesn't have any real 'stuff', but the writing is so good and the voice so authentic that the novelty of reading a story about something other than domestic conflicts seems secondary. I was thinking for a word to describe this work, which reads like an anthology of great writing, and I could only come up with fearlessness, that Shepard has no fear, and that allied with his skill and curiosity and utter decency as an artist, he has given us a work of depth and intelligence and beauty. Here's the last paragraph of the final story in the collection 'Climb Aboard the Mighty Flea' where a World War II German pilot, knowing a horrific war has already been lost, straps himself into the first rocket powered fighter plane,

'No one's speaking. Our ears are on the slipstream. Our thumbs are on the cannon triggers. Our hearts are in the dive. We have become the inexplicable. We have become the unbelievable. We are our own descendants, the children we have always wanted to be.'

Wow.

16 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

John Ashcroft & the creature from the black lagoon

By Jeff Topham

This is the best short fiction collection I've read in several years. Shepard's stories are both economical and lean--there isn't much here that's over 20 pages long, but Shepard packs into those 20 pages a complexity of theme and character that most writers can't approach even at novella length. It is a dizzying collection, by turns violent, funny, and wrenchingly sad. Shepard writes in a dazzling array of voices, handling each with effortless authority. He is particularly good at adolescents (see also the amazing Project X), but these stories also give voice to a Yugoslav football player, a German test pilot, John Entwistle, John Ashcroft, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Superb.

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