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Disruptions, stories by Stephen Millhauser, Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover, 270 pages, \$28.00

At 81, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Millhauser is the elder statesman of the short story. Most of the stories in this collection were published between 2015 and 2021 and from the heartbreaking ending of “The Change” to the compelling opening of “The Little People,” *Disruptions* is a joy.

The first story, “One Summer Night” begins “In the summer of my sixteenth birthday, I fell in love with the night.” The action follows a young man with his first serious girlfriend, or as serious as love can be for someone barely past the meridian of his teens, who begins spending evenings at his girlfriend’s house. They talk on the couch and watch television, but their relationship is innocent and exploratory. A relationship utterly changed one evening when our narrator finds himself alone one evening with his girlfriend’s mother. The brief time he spends alone with her, alters him, alters his relationship with both his girlfriend and her mother. They talk on the sofa, push each other on the swing set, and climb onto the roof. The stunning conclusion is not salacious or sexual, but inappropriate in every way.

The narrator of “The Fight” is a bookish eighth grader, who after witnessing an after-school altercation between two boys his own age, begins to examine what his reaction in similar circumstances would be. Few details are given about his life at home, and his family. His mother teaches grade school, his father college, and he recalls playing with toy soldiers at home, while his parents read. It is easy for the reader to insert themselves into this character’s existence, to see their own struggle with change and expectation in the place of the narrator. The otherness of the setting, which could be last year, yet somehow feels like decades ago, becomes a fantasy world for empathy.

“The Shadow Theater” is a favorite of mine. It contains no discernible characters and uses no dialogue, yet the story drives forward from the opening sentence, creating a world of new imagination as the unnamed town in the story is transformed by a new artistic experience.

“When I look back to that first performance, I’m astonished to recall a time before it all began. I was young, I was ambitious, my wife hummed as she slipped into her bathing suit. Our children laughed in the sun. We welcomed things, we and our friends, we seized whatever life had to offer, while at the same time we never felt the need to step outside certain unspoken bounds that struck us as natural and healthy.”

The performance is exactly as it sounds: shadows back-projected against a white screen. Simple, even threadbare in its conception, yet the art changes everyone who encounters it, upending the lives of an entire town, altering the perspective of a generation. The story invites allegory, though none is explicitly revealed.

And then Millhauser will deliver a haunted house story so original and inevitable you wonder that it has not been done before. In “The Haunting” Four best friends at the end of high school challenge one of their own to stay the night in the Harrington House, a notorious home with a dark history. When the first friend emerges at dawn altered and unable or unwilling to speak about what happened, the narrator spends a night at the haunted house himself. We see the transformation from a different angle, a haunting without jump scares or ghosts.

Disruptions is a collection best read in multiple sittings. Each of these stories on their own is remarkable, but read sequentially, a sameness creeps in. I longed for characters if not bright, then at least colorful. Yet I respect Millhauser’s understanding that we are members of communities as much we are individuals. Whatever independence we imagine or crave for ourselves can be undone with a single event, as in the story, “After the Beheading.”

“All I knew was that we were a peaceful town, with a guillotine on the green.”