

BOOKS

The triumph of self in the face of adversity

Reconciliation

By Dorothy Speak

REVIEWED BY GILLIAN CAMPBELL

Glebe author Dorothy Speak is passionate about the ability of the human spirit to rise above tragedy and adversity. Her newest collection of short stories, *Reconciliation*, is an exploration of how people learn to use their own inner strength to overcome personal tragedy and loss. For example, a slightly dull and self-righteous woman inadvertently kills a pedestrian in a car accident in "Surcease of Sorrow." Her horror and shame at what she has done leads to her shedding much of her past life in favour of quieter, simpler pursuits.

I had the pleasure of chatting with Ms. Speak over coffee one morning; we discussed this book and her approach to writing. Speak is a charming and outgoing woman and I found it hard to imagine these dark stories coming from such a bright and upbeat person. She explained that many of her stories are based on personal experiences or people she has heard about or met. Growing up in a poor family in post-war Woodstock, Ontario, she watched her parents struggle financially to raise their seven children. The story "A Penny to Save" is loosely based on her childhood experience of a father constantly seeking work and a mother constantly worried about money.

Speak is particularly fascinated with the individual and the power of feelings. The issues her characters face may be personally tragic, but each character gains a deeper insight into his or her own personality at the end of the stories. She does not see her writing as dark or sad, but as offering the promise of "hopefully ever after." As a reader, I found the glimmers of light at the end of the stories faint. I would have liked a little more humour and happiness to offset their intensity. Life is a balance of joy and sadness, and these stories reflect only the darker aspects of life. I found myself hoping she would include a happy, funny story just to mix things up a bit!

As a writer, Speak is gifted at evoking the settings in which her characters live. Glebe residents will recognise Linden Terrace and its view of First Avenue School in the story "Sins of the Father." "The mother's bedroom on the front of the house, overlooked a strip of park, a narrow canal and then a handsome old red primary school. The children poured out of it to play tag or bounce balls in



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Stories

the paved yard. Their bright clothes flashed through a screen of poplars." I can picture this image vividly, as if I were looking at the school from Linden Terrace.

Speak says that she loves to use water imagery in her work. Nearly all of her stories are situated on or near water and in many cases the main characters look to water as a rejuvenating force. In the story "Your Youth So Tragic," a young teenage girl named Mayo becomes pregnant and convinces her brother to drown the baby in the nearby river. Haunted by her decision and her brother's subsequent imprisonment, Mayo looks to the river for healing and redemption. "On this sunny day, she sees the river shining, shining. The surge of the water, the rapid current, the swirls and eddies, the life force of this channel. She senses the child suspended within it... Suddenly, she's flooded with energy, as though the river itself is flowing into her veins, a transfusion."

If you are interested in a thought-provoking and serious look into the dark corners of the human heart, you will come away from this book with a richer insight into the ability of people to reconcile themselves to their own mistakes and shortcomings. Speak's characters come to life on the page; their struggles seem real. I could picture Pilar, for example, the angry and tough woman in "Made-Up Stories" who finds herself excluded from her family's love by virtue of her own harsh treatment of them. At the end of the story, she mournfully asks "what is this love that they feel for each other?"

This collection of stories is Speak's fourth book. She has written a novel, *The Wife Tree*, and two other short story collections: *The Counsel of the Moon* and *Object of Your Love*. All of these works explore different elements of human relationships, their fragility and strength. *Reconciliation* is Speak's first book to be self-published, although many of the stories included in the collection have appeared in literary journals and magazines.

You can buy *Reconciliation* at Perfect Books, Octopus Books, or Singing Pebble Books. You can also order it online at www.chaptersindigo.ca or as a print or e-book through www.amazon.com.

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