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## On David Long

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*Home Fires*

David Long

University of Illinois Press

Urbana, Illinois

In the title story of *Home Fires*, the man named Pack tells how his truck flipped off the mountain road, tumbled down a steep slope, and slammed into a granite slab. "I was headed home," he says. The woman listening replies, "It should be that easy."

David Long knows it's not easy; his characters struggle toward and with what they call home. These struggles create the tension by which the stories succeed. Although the eight stories cohere to the broad idea of home, Long avoids imposing a sense of redundancy on the reader by varying the meaning of home, the situations, characters, and narrative style.

The characters have been displaced by divorce; the death of a child, spouse or parent; or some ineffable emptiness. "Eclipse," the first story, begins:

I came home on borrowed rides, east across the sunblinded distances of Nevada and Utah, north into the forests of Montana, slouched in the cracked seats of pickups, remembering indistinctly what had taken me away and more vividly what I had found. In the back of my mind was the idea that being home would put an end to it.

The expressed warning in "Life As We Know It" is "Terrible thing to get caught in the wilderness." This is also the implied warning throughout *Home Fires*. In these stories, wilderness is not only the indifferent landscape; it is the isolated areas of the soul. The danger of being stranded in a lonely, personal wilderness drives the characters homeward.

But home is not where the characters expect it to be. Their surprising journeys bring them to homes found in all-night wedding chapels, abandoned hot springs, dead-end bars, cello shops, and in the fleeting moments of a solar eclipse. Long plays unique variations on his theme.

He conceives his characters from only a few general molds, but his keen perception and precise details render individuals who are alive with diverse idiosyncratic personalities. In five of the stories, an old man influences the protagonist deeply. Through his fine characterizations, Long avoids the mistake of presenting old men as generic characters who act in a predictable way. The same is true of his middle-aged men and women. In the confines of his chosen molds, he creates much.

Long uses first person, partially omniscient and fully omniscient narrators; the stories are told in past, present, and successfully mixed tenses; and his narrators/protagonists are male and female. Stylistically, the most interesting story is "Other People's Stories." Hanna, the narrator, begins in the present tense. He tells the middle and largest part of the story in the past,

fifteen years earlier. He resumes the present tense at a time before the opening scene, then retells the opening. Reading his before-and-after description of the same scene, we see how telling the story changes Hanna's perception of his present situation.

Long has a knack for capturing the texture of place. The stories are located in Massachusetts, California, Oklahoma, Montana, and the road space in between. The first six stories take place in the western United States. There is no concrete detail indicating that "Morning Practice" does not take place in the same area, but the opening pages create the atmosphere of New England and the mood of characters born and living there. Before Long's reference to the Red Sox, I had recognized not only New England, but Massachusetts.

Long's imagery is revealing and unique: "She had teeth like kernels of sweet corn allowed to overripen on the cob." His imagery works most when it not only clarifies description, but when it also comments on the entire story. In "Morning Practice," Gerhard's wife has died recently. Kate, his daughter, has been divorced and come home to be with Gerhard. As they drive through the countryside, Gerhard remembers his younger years with his wife. When his memories move too close to the present, "His voice stilled, like the clotting of a wound." Gerhard's and Kate's stories are about the painful process of healing, and this image dramatically highlights that pain.

The dialogue also works best when it not only moves the scene and reveals character, but comments on the entire story. In "Life As We Know It," St. John tells Snowy that he is driving to Los Angeles. Their dialogue is interrupted by St. John's thoughts about his job, which is transporting disassembled cabins, barns and houses to Recycled Interiors, an outfit that designs western-deco cocktail lounges and offices; St. John salvages the remains of people's homes. Snowy, who is self-sufficient, replies, "I've never been to that state." Long imparts authorial irony without stepping into the scene.

Long's skill is founded in language. His prose rhythms underscore scene and description as a fine soundtrack supports a film.

Longer than anyone knows, fir and tamarack had clung to the sharp slopes of the canyon, ravaged by lightning fires and bark beetles and gravity, their tenacity witnessed only by the moody northwestern clouds, by birds of prey whose serrated wings bore them on the tricky thermals, by families of deer carefully following trails beside the fast gray water.

The recurring vowel sounds and long clauses recreate the movement of time, elements and animals that the paragraph describes.

In seven of the stories, the characters reach home. The successful exception is "Border Crossing." Carver never knew his father, and his mother died when he was twelve; he was raised by an aunt who resented him. Carver takes flight with T.R., a fugitive. He is lured by T.R.'s decisiveness and confidence.



They murder an old man. Carver could have prevented the murder if he'd had the strength to make a decision. He hadn't. Through the cops, courts and jails that follow, Carver imagines the old man

standing up from the couch and shuffling past him to the door, squeezing him on the shoulder like a friendly old grandfather and saying, "You done right this time, boy."

Carver's chance for home died with the old man.

There are no sentimental endings in *Home Fires* because the victories are small and hard-earned; they are victories of endurance. In "Like Some Distant Crying," Celestia's husband left her after their son died. "Her choice was movement instead of bitterness." She succeeds not only in restarting her own life, but in reviving the spirit of an old man who has given up almost everything but food and breath.

Long does not fictionalize life; rather, he reveals the heroism in living. Endurance is the phoenix in *Home Fires*. The spirit of Long's collection is exemplified in this, one of the last paragraphs of the title story:

Another chance, she thought, sitting again. She studied the pills lying before her, the tears beginning to burn her eyes. She scraped her hand across the tabletop, scattering the pills across the kitchen, spilling back the chair as she stood and ran out into the darkness of the house, turning on lights, screaming *Goddamn it* at the tears, screaming *No* at the treads of the stairs. *Goddamn it. Goddamn it*, throwing open doors, flipping switches, every one she could lay a hand on, until the whole house was burning and raging with life.