Dusk by James Salter (review)

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Dusk. By James Salter. (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988. 157 pages, $14.95.)

Thrown from her horse and badly crushed, a lone rider remembers her past lovers. Bored by success, two American lawyers try to expunge their world-weariness on their tour of Italy by picking up a schoolgirl. A well-off divorcée learns to her sadness that a lover has betrayed her. Such are the pangs in James Salter's first collection of short stories. People fixate on love as life's antidote, only to end up rejected or victorious in the wrong bed.

It's not only that the characters keep "looking for love in in all the wrong places." What troubles here is the steady diet of self-absorption. One feels a bit awkward trying to believe that a lady just crushed by a horse would have little else on her mind than lost love. We may grant two lawyers their fling, but isn't there anything else in Italy to interest them beyond an easy pickup? Can't the divorcée find other matters to dwell on than one more affair gone awry? If not, we are dealing with personalities trivialized into bathos.

One could simply dismiss the book on that basis. One cannot dismiss, however, the technical excellence of the way Salter captures a city in sunset or a day in approaching Fall, or the way he maneuvers a character from one delicate scene to the next. Such abilities make the heart leap. But abilities to what end? The author weds his good writing to hackneyed and unrevealing situations. Mulling over Salter's novels, critics applaud a "pointillist style" unworthy of the choice of protagonists and bemoan Salter's "unearned lyricism that envelops . . . like Muzak." One sees with a disappointed twinge that the flaw has carried over into this latest work.

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Family Attractions. By Judith Freeman. (New York: Viking, 1988. 227 pages, $16.95.)

Is there something about growing up Mormon that predisposes a person to write short stories? Or have the great Mormon-experience novels escaped my attention, or my memory? No matter, provided the stories continue to hone that rough edge between personal values and day-to-day experience.

Like Levi Peterson's *The Canyons of Grace*, Freeman's stories are about how lives are shaped by values—whether struggling to live up to them, or live them down. Nearly all the stories are set or rooted in the West, with family ties (usually to Utah or California) affecting the characters' goals and expectations. The stories are tightly told, solidly grounded in the present place and time, with a strong sense of each main character's personal history.

The most memorable is "The Death of a Mormon Elder," in which a Mexican couple have found prosperity in Utah after converting to Mormonism,