

## Books

# Lush layers of 'Love'

Andre Dubus III's latest work, 'Dirty Love,' is four novellas that present powerful tales of people struggling and staggering against pain

By Anthony Doerr  
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If your mind is anything like mine, it can stumble through a half-dozen different thoughts in a heartbeat. Right now, for example, I'm eating a cracker with hummus on it and remembering eating chickpeas and dill in Rome eight years ago, which in turn summons a memory of my twin sons as toddlers staggering around the Piazza Farnese in diapers. I'm also wondering — faintly — if there's any lexicographic relationship between the words "humus" and "hummus" and worrying about getting crumbs in my keyboard. And all of this is happening in the time it takes my computer to come wake up.

The writer Charles Baxter, in an excellent essay called "Lush Life," argues for a kind of writing that mimics and reinforces the way our minds experience time. "[W]e are often in two places at once temporally," he writes. "[W]e are in the here-and-now, but we

### DIRTY LOVE

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are also in the back-then." Since the past is always folded just inside the texture of the present, Baxter says, why not attempt prose that manages to superimpose the two?

This "lushness," as Baxter calls it, is the singular strength of Andre Dubus III. Dubus, author of the memoir "Townie" and the novel "House of Sand and Fog," has a new book out, "Dirty Love." It's composed of four novellas, and in each Dubus manages to haunt the present narrative with hordes of memories from his characters' pasts.

In the first piece, "Listen Carefully As Our Options Have Changed," Mark Welch is a 56-year-old project manager who has hired a private detective to catch his wife in the act of adultery. For the first couple dozen pages of "Listen Carefully," all Mark does in the present story is drink a Coke and open his wife's underwear drawer. Yet, as his mind zigzags from his childhood to the moment he confronts his wife with the private detective's DVD, the reader is never bored, never impatient. The whole novella takes place in a single day, but from that day Dubus fashions a lens through which a reader sees the sad arc of Mark's entire life.

A different kind of love is at issue in the second novella, "Marla." Here an overweight 29-year-old virgin named Marla falls for a 37-year-old radio frequency engineer. Just as Marla gets initiated into the intersecting realms of sex, affection, and cohabitation, her innocence begins to slip away. Soon enough she feels that "her life was real-

ly no better than it had been before when she was alone, an earlier unhappiness that now seemed preferable to this one."

We meet Robert in the third piece, an adulterous bartender who dreams of becoming a poet. As with Mark in the first tale, the reader's sympathy for Robert frays as we begin to better understand his past; by the end, we come to see that he's just a huckster selling a false image of himself, with nothing worthwhile in his life except his wife's imperiled belief in him.

Finally we come to the last novella, "Dirty Love," in which 18-year-old Devon comes to live with her 90-year-old great-uncle Francis after an explicit video of her is posted on the Internet. Love is the issue for both Devon and Francis, and the novella becomes an incandescent story about chat roulette, teenage sexuality, family fealty, war, and trying to learn to live with another human being.

What's at stake in all four pieces is the tension between preserving the hope of innocence while knowing all along the anguish of lived experience. The title itself carries a sense of that duality, and Dubus has positively shot the entire book through with this feeling. The threat, specter, and repercussions of cheating — "[s]uch an old and predictable story, ageless really, like some virus that affects some marriages and not others" — looms large on nearly every page. Someone slips up, and the flames start chewing away. In Dubus's prose, hope, pinioned against experience, comes to interpenetrate everything: his characters' childhoods, their memories, and their present predicaments.

All four novellas are well-made pieces of fiction in their own right. Taken together, though, they present something more powerful, something more — if you'll forgive the adjective one more time — lush. When Robert from the third story shows up tending bar where Devon from the fourth buses tables, or when a minor character from the first novella emerges briefly in the second, a reader begins to feel the swarming multiplicities of love as it is practiced in Dubus's territory — the border between Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Regardless of age, Dubus seems to say, regardless of economic class, of education, of parentage, this community is shot through with lust and pain; we are all broken, staggering creatures, capable of pure goodness, and also great selfishness. Like Jennifer Egan's "A Visit from the Goon Squad," the pleasure in "Dirty Love" is in seeing the multiple narratives, like light towers at the corners of a field, shine their collective, overlapping glow onto the arena below.

Anthony Doerr's latest novel, "All the Light We Cannot See," will be published in spring 2014.

