



Little Raw Souls

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Award-winning author Steven Schwartz writes of loss and replenishment in eleven suspenseful and affecting stories. Set mostly in the contemporary American West, the stories take on the identity of a place where tradition is still a work in progress and acts of self-discovery arise for characters at any age. In "Stranger," a woman falls asleep in an airport, only to become the victim of a crime by a man who robs and kisses her at the same time. A divorced man in "Bless Everybody," winner of the Cohen Award from Ploughshares, finds himself threatened by the young couple he tries to aid. And in "Absolute Zero," a seventeen-year-old boy, needing his dying mother's permission to join the Marines, experiences a startling encounter with the promiscuous teenage daughter of a Marine sergeant he looks up to. Steven Schwartz's stories never stand still. With pathos and humor, they probe ahead, searching out the tender souls of his characters.

Little Raw Souls Details

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From Reader Review Little Raw Souls for online ebook

John Luiz says

I have been following Steven Schwartz since his great 1994 novel, *Therapy*, which still ranks among my top 5, all-time favorite novels. That was published after 2 fantastic story collections, and then another novel came out a few years later. But over the past decade-plus, his writing has only been in appearing in literary magazines, and while I have been able to catch a few along the way, I was excited to learn he had another collection.

He really is a masterful writer. Many better known writers are famous for their talent with a particular facet of writing, such as dialogue or description. But it's rare to find a writer who excels at every aspect of writing. While I get totally immersed in his stories, there are times when you just have to stop and marvel at how good he is at everything - description, dialogue, metaphors, character development and plotting. His premises are also always bold and fascinating. Just two examples -- a man reunites with the cousin he had a crush on as a teenager after she's had a sex-change operation ("Seeing Miles"); a teacher pulls out a gun in front of his class and points it at his head ("Indie").

To play the simple game of finding one word that characterizes Schwartz's writing, it's dignity - all the characters in these pieces have it, even when they are behaving badly. Schwartz is an author who makes you respect and have total compassion for his characters, even as he's revealing all of their warts.

The 11 stories in the collection are:

1. *Bless Everybody* - 21 pp -- A powerful and dramatic story about a retiree living on a large piece of property on the Colorado/Wyoming border. He's leading a quiet life, still pining for his ex-wife, when he lets a hippie-ish young couple expecting a baby stay in a cabin on his land. Trouble ensues after the young man kills a deer out of season, presumably to feed his family.
2. *Stranger* - 17 pp - A wife and mother is waiting in the Philadelphia airport for a flight home to Denver, after her father died. A man steals her wallet when she is napping, and then she meets a kind man in a bar and has to decide whether to take advantage of the in-between state her life has fallen into.
3. *Absolute Zero* - 21p - A moving story about a 17-year-old who wants to join the Marines but needs the permission of his mother, who is vehemently opposed to wars. He befriends the sergeant who is trying to recruit him, but a failed encounter with the sergeant's disturbed daughter has major consequences.
4. *Seeing Miles* - 14 pp - A great, great story about a man who reunites with his cousin, whom he hasn't seen in 25 years since his Bar Mitzvah 25 years earlier. That occasion was the first time he'd met her, and he'd developed an instant crush. When they reunite, his cousin has had a sex change. Interacting with the man who was once the girl he lusted after sets off a whirl of confusing emotions. Told with remarkable poignancy and dignity.
5. *Galisteo Street* - 22 pp - A story that blew me away when I first read it in *Prairie Schooner*, and it had the same effect when I read it for the second time in this collection. It's about a man who tries to reconnect with the daughter he and his girlfriend at the time gave up for adoption. He was young then and didn't want to be encumbered with a child, so he could pursue his ambitions of becoming a writer. Now, 30 years later, after a few unsuccessful books, his writing has dried up. Even though he got married and had children of his own,

who are now happy and successful, he can't let go of the desire to reconnect with his first child, who lived a perfectly content life without him. It's a heart-wrenching story that also offers some eye-opening details of the ego-smashing hardships writers who aren't on the bestseller lists contend with.

6. Indie - 17 pp - A tour de force that examines a tragedy but still manages to find a few lighthearted, comic moments along the way. A history teacher who is a Civil War re-enactor pulls out a Civil War-era pistol and points it at his head in front of his class. Told from the multiple perspectives of the teacher and the students, who sit in shocked terror and confusion over what he's going to do. It's a brilliant look at all the profound and prosaic thoughts that play across the minds of the people in that room.

7. Natural Causes - 22 pp - A retired geology professor's wife dies in a car accident just when she was about to leave him. He starts another relationship with another professor several decades younger than he. She is the opposite of his wife in every way - tall and boisterous while his wife was petite and demur. His conflict is that he can't see himself with her, even though he is starting to fall in love with her. The younger woman, Penny, is a marvelous character. Her goofiness and over-eagerness make you understand why this reserved man mind find her at-times off-putting, but she has so much zealous energy, you can't help but root for her.

8. The Last Communist - 22 pages - An almost mini-novel-like story about a young man who is the son of Russian Jews who works during the summer of 1970 in a Jewish resort. But this is far from "Dirty Dancing," all the Jews at this resort are communists, who still don't want to believe Stalin was all bad, and they engage as often as they can in peaceful demonstrations against the dangers of capitalism. The young man befriends another boy who has a low-draft number and a dark secret - he took part in the part in the burning of a ROTC building on his college campus. There's a lot going on this story - including the main characters' crush on his friend's younger sister - and it's all brilliantly told.

9. Opposite Ends of the World - 18 pp - A man with multiple sclerosis has to resign from his job as a music teacher and deal with the predicaments of his new life - his unpredictable pains, a wife not willing to give up on her hopes of having children even with the demands the MS imposes on their lives, and finally a neighbor who keeps anonymously complaining about their barking dogs. It's a powerful piece about a man having to cope with his own gradual and inevitable decline.

10. Blockage - 20 pp - A failed writer, who is now a dental supplies salesman, takes his wife, who is recovering from sinus surgery to a resort in Arizona. The goal is to celebrate their anniversary, but the resort happens to be near the home of the writer's ex-girlfriend who became a literary sensation with her first novel. The experience becomes a trial for the man, as he's stuck between jealousy over his pretentious ex-girlfriend's extravagant success and his sense of obligation to his wife, with whom he's leading a happily ordinary life. His wife, a writer as well, has her own secret as she's also navigating the space between an ordinary life and aspirations for something bigger.

11. The Theory of Everything - 22 pp - The final story in this marvelous collection packs a wallop. It's about an 82-year-old man, who, along with his wife, has to take care of his depressed son's children, after the son's junkie wife walks out on them. The grandparents make a normal life for the kids, but then after four years away, the wife returns with the promise that she is clean and sober. The grandfather has to face the possibility of losing the children to a son he knows isn't stable and a woman he's still justifiably suspicious of.

Laura Wuarin says

This a terrific collection of short stories. They are bold and thoughtful and I was brought into the stories. They are thoughtful and inspiring. Beautifully written and composed. I look forward to his next collection. The psychology in these stories rings true.

Dennis says

I often have these moments where I suddenly sit upright, roll up my sleeves, and utter, “Now, we’re in *business!*” Sometimes, I wring my hands or make loud knuckle-popping sounds. These moments are often associated with something good or eventful, perhaps even extraordinary. Something that takes me in a new direction. It can be something big like a teenager getting the keys to a Porsche Boxster (or for those of you who grew up in the 1970s or 1980s, a Chevy Camaro, a Pontiac Firebird, or a Ford Mustang). It’s the moment the teenager says to himself, “things are going to be different from now on, yes sir they will,” as he fantasizes about cruising for chicks. Or it could be something small like hearing a girl say ‘yes’ after you ask her out on a date. These moments are little jolts of electricity shooting up your spine to make you a bit more attentive, more hyper-aware. And these little jolts are what Steven Schwartz does so masterfully in his short story collection, *Little Raw Souls*.

In each of his eleven stories, Schwartz injects something truly kinetic. Upon their encounter, you realize you’re reading something other than what you expected. And for someone like me who is tired of reading stories upon stories (and watching movies upon movies) that recycle the same material ad nauseum, it’s a welcome collection. Over a span of three days in March 2013, *Little Raw Souls* was my antidote from the same ol’ same ol’. How does Schwartz do it? Some of his stories contain unexpected events that radically shift the plot. Other stories introduce strange (and strangely beguiling) characters. But all the stories show imperfect characters making imperfect choices in an imperfect world. These flawed characters try to do the “right” thing according to their own personal code of conduct, but there’s a catch: the world is largely unreceptive. And this is what makes the stories bubble with intensity. When you get to these kinetic moments or meet these flawed characters, you sit up and invariably utter, “Now we’re in business!”

Spoiler alert.

Here are some examples of the strange:

In “Bless Everybody,” the 68-year old narrator’s life is *reorganized*, to put it mildly, after a hippie pistol-shoots a mule deer without a hunting license and during the “No Hunting” season simply because he and his hippie wife were hungry. Now there’s something you don’t see every day – a hippie with a pistol *and* the hippie actually big-game hunting for his own food. (The thought “hippie=vegetarian” crossed my mind.) The exasperated narrator says, “You ever heard of a grocery store?” This is the least of his problems. A search for a solution only exposes more problems.

In “Stranger,” a woman who falls asleep at an airport while waiting for her flight is informed that a man who claimed to be her husband took her wallet...and kissed her on the cheek. It was, as Schwartz wrote, “a violation disguised as sweetness.”

In “Absolute Zero,” a mysterious boy who goes by the title, the *Seer*, is said to possess supernatural powers.

The fact that he's a sickly boy who seems to spend the bulk of his time at a hospital hooked up to an oxygen mask isn't held against him. Connor, the protagonist, is drawn to him in ways he can't comprehend. At the other end of the spectrum, Connor is also drawn to the Korean girl Giigee, who is also mysterious and omnipotent in her own down-to-earth way.

In "Seeing Miles," a man is reunited with Miles, a distant transgendered male cousin, after 25 years. The last time they were together, the man was a boy at his own bar mitzvah, Miles was a 15-year old girl named Mimi, and he was smitten with her. He thought, *I'll marry you someday.*

In "Indie," a high school teacher holds his class hostage at gunpoint.

In "Opposite Ends of the World," a man with multiple sclerosis is harassed by a neighbor who can best be described as a High-Functioning Asperger's with superhuman hearing. When this neighbor was introduced, my first reaction was, "Holy Shit!" (Plus the obligatory, "Now we're in business!")

To say that Schwartz is a master of conflict is an understatement. Something always happens in his stories. The fact that his characters are off-balance at the outset makes the happenings even more vibrant. I think Schwartz likes to create odd characters and lock them in his small and enclosed fictional room because he feels, rightly, that something interesting may result from the clash. For example, in "Opposite Ends of the World," the story sprung to life after a guy with bizarre HF Asperger's-like behavior traits clashes with the main character, a man with multiple sclerosis.

He creates characters with such complexity that when he engages them in war, I as a reader didn't really have a clear-cut hero/villain. I suspect that he really wanted to kill off some of his characters one by one (e.g., Calvert in "Bless Everybody" and Luciana in "Blockage"). But that would be the easy way out and, unlike Hollywood, things don't (and shouldn't) come that easily. Besides, it doesn't make sense that characters manufactured with so much flesh and blood should have a simple OFF switch. That would be too cheap – and frankly, ridiculous. The closest he came was in "Blockage," where Patrick, an unsuccessful writer, is reunited with Luciana, his ex-girlfriend who is now a commercially successful (but phoney) writer. He is, at times, envious and jealous of her. He even hates her. One evening, they go for a walk and arrive at an excavated pit on a construction site. In mid-sentence, Luciana disappears and Patrick suspects she fell over into the steep pit. Schwartz writes of Patrick, "His dark wish for Luciana's demise had come true...and his panicked shouts to her below had been met with a harsh and ominous silence."

Typically, people think of conflict as a simple war where two parties are clashing over territory or property. Schwartz, however, offers another variation: one party wants to change while the other doesn't. It's not about a clash over the possession of "things" but a clash over change versus the status quo. I heard an interview by some high ranking official that the purpose of government agencies like the CIA and MI-5/6 was to maintain the status quo against groups that seek change. And, like Schwartz's characters, some believe in change while others value preserving the way things are. I think Schwartz's exploration of change versus the status quo is even more intriguing than his collection of strange characters. For most of his stories, the change versus status quo theme is manifested in the desire to perform Good Samaritan-like acts that go either unfulfilled or unrecognized. His characters want to give, but there are no takers. The recipients of their charity either fail to appreciate it or flat out don't want it. In "Bless Everybody," the narrator tries to help a hippie girl escape from an abusive relationship. In "Galisteo Street," a man wants to help out his grown biological daughter (whom he had given up for adoption when she was a baby) but she doesn't want him in her life. In "The Theory of Everything," the old narrator believes (rightly or wrongly) that he's the only man who can save his grandchildren in a world populated by incompetents. In "The Last Communist," the narrator sends money and news to a draft dodger hiding out in Canada for many years. In "Natural Causes,"

Penny the grad student offers her love to the aging professor, who immediately dumps her.

The disconnectedness occurs frequently because these characters don't know others as well as they think they do. They think people are like them, following the same code of conduct with the same rational thought processes. Sir Thomas More believed that he would prevail against his enemies because the law was on his side, he himself respectfully followed the law, and he mistakenly assumed that everyone else would follow the same law. Whatever assumptions Schwartz's characters are making – whatever blinders they're wearing – are keeping them from seeing people clearly for what they are. And to the extent that one's view of others is a reflection of one's view of oneself, these characters are fundamentally unaware of themselves. In "Natural Causes," Penny and the professor have an argument. Schwartz writes, "She was crying now; he'd never seen her cry before, and it was like sex in that way, surprising to see someone so transformed." The professor dumps Penny within days.

Arguably, the best story in the collection is "The Theory of Everything" – although you can easily make a case for "Bless Everybody," "Seeing Miles," "The Last Communist," "Stranger," and "The Opposite Ends of the World." In "The Theory of Everything," an old (but mentally sharp) man is desperate to save his grandchildren from the desiccating influence of their drug addict on-again off-again mother. He can't rely on his own son (his grandchildren's father) because, honestly, he's even worse – he's incompetent in every way that matters. To rid the mother from their lives permanently, he rationalizes and hatches a plan. The plan is flawed but it's all he can come up with at the time. Sometimes, even the smartest people make dumb mistakes. No one is immune from errors in judgment. The story is written in a first person voice that seems to have been borne right out of the film *noirs* of the 1940s. As I read the story, I could "hear" Edward G. Robinson (Fred MacMurray's boss in *Double Indemnity*) as the narrator. I also thought of Raymond Chandler and his stylishly blunt rat-tat-tat delivery, minus the "dame" and "broad" vocabulary. The first few sentences from the story:

My son is fearful. Not scared. Scared is all right. I was scared during the war, but fearful is something else. He can't get out of bed some days. He stays in his condo with the blinds closed...

My personal favorites are "Bless Everybody," "Galisteo Street," "The Theory of Everything," and "The Last Communist." In fact, while reading "The Last Communist," I was longing for a novel version of this story. There is one unforgettable scene: the narrator describes a time when he was a 16-year old boy who goes swimming in a lake in the nude and almost drowns – but not before Julie, a 14-year girl, rescues him by pulling him aboard her canoe. The stuff of fantasy.

Karen DeGroot Carter says

Beautiful writing!

Lynn Demarest says

For an aspiring writer, it's downright depressing to see "Fifty Shades of Grey" sell millions while Steven Schwartz's "Little Raw Souls" goes largely ignored, for what it demonstrates is that regardless of the quality of one's work, lightning still must strike, the Lotto still must be won.

The eleven stories in this little collection remind me of the songs included in what has become known as The American Songbook. Each is expertly crafted with love and care, a little gem thoroughly imagined. I came away from nearly every one of them with the feeling I'd read a full novel.

The stories are straightforward, easy to read, clear, the writing as tight as tree bark. (More than once I found myself thinking he'd forgotten to include a word, then decided no, it wasn't needed, the meaning was clear without it.)

You can bet I will seek out Mr. Schwartz's other titles.

(Thanks to M. Evelina Galang via Chauncey Mabe for the tip.)

David says

I'd not heard of Steven Schwartz, or his publisher, Autumn House, before reading this, so had no idea what to expect. What I probably hadn't expected was this set of perfectly crafted, poignant, emotionally complex tales, each with more depth than many a novel. They're all pretty conventional - nothing showy or experimental here - but each has the feel of real life, with characters muddling their way through as best they can. Not a single story is less than very good and the majority are excellent. Easily the best collection I've read so far this year.

Michelle Tooker says

Schwartz is a talented author and his craft really shines through in this collection. There was a bit of irony for me as I started the book while in the Philadelphia airport waiting to board a flight to Phoenix. If you've read the collection, you'll know that there are many strange connections in the stories to my circumstances at the time. I found this eerie but the coincidences also helped me better relate to the stories.

Overall, the number one thing I enjoyed about this collection is the reality that we're all "little raw souls". I love that description and how we see the rawness and soul of each character.

I found something to enjoy in each story, but "Bless Everybody" felt too familiar (similar to something I've read before which made it predictable) and "The Last Communist" started off great but felt way too rushed at the end. My favorites were "Stranger," "Absolute Zero" and "Indie," which I especially liked the format of.

Lisa says

Really engaging stories, I really enjoyed reading this little find!

Don says

Little Raw Souls, by Steven Schwarz is a gem of a book. All the short stories here are excellent, managing to pull you into these character's lives. In fact each is so well written, so insightful and so touching I left each wanting more. This is an author I want to read more of.

Marjorie Hudson says

Steven Schwartz's new story collection unlocks the puzzling secret hearts of men on the brink of realization, at the cusp of middle age or seniorhood. There is something deep and fine in his characterization, something rarely seen and perfect pitch. Each character comes to the uncomfortable edge of a deep chasm, across which is a glimpse of human fallibility, a sense of Aristotelean terror and pity. Aristotle coined the term catharsis for what he saw as the purging of the emotions of pity and fear aroused by a classic tragedy. In Schwartz's stories, the reader's catharsis is in response to the pity and terror of nothing more tragic than the lives of middle class men set adrift by life, sad and exposed. A Jewish boy weaned on Socialism finally reveals his secret life of supporting an exiled student radical. An emeritus college professor walks away from a chance at passion, then turns back to look, like Orpheus at the gates of hell. A failed writer faces his past choices: a series of devil's bargains of trading integrity and accuracy for a brief flash of fame and fortune. By choosing to make heroes or antiheroes out of beaten down teachers and educated men, and the women who stand beside them or desert them, Schwartz has done what the recent New York Times article said we now have proof for: literary fiction teaches us empathy. Put Schwartz's skillful stories on your shelf with Chekhov and Alice Munro. But be prepared to open your heart to a great sadness when you do.

David says

The craft in these stories is impressive. They each seem as intricately developed as a novel. Schwartz paints such a complete world in such a small space. The variety is impressive as well, though there is a similarity running throughout in the emotionally intimate moments at which Schwartz catches his characters. I love the soft, compassionate feel that I get when facing those intimate moments, the humanity of the characters. In short, wonderful stories.

Joanna says

I'm biased since I simply don't love short stories, but some of the characters were compelling and these stories were well written.

Vince Darcangelo says

Those old enough to remember the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 will recall the iconic image of that disaster: A misdirected auto dashing along the Bay Bridge, then poof, it's gone, nose-diving through an unforeseen fissure. Rewind the tape. Watch it over and over. You scream at the car through the television.

You wave your arms. But there's no stopping it, and no looking away.

That's what it feels like reading Steven Schwartz's new collection of short stories, *Little Raw Souls* (Autumn House Press), 11 tales of peril, redemption and disaster.

Read the full review at Transgress Magazine, <http://transgressmagazine.com/2013/02....>

Mark Stevens says

Short story fans, add "Little Raw Souls" to your reading queue. All eleven stories lower the tractor beam and pull you in. Schwartz writes about ordinary people in semi-harrowing moments. "Characters who populate short stories generally have less grand schemes to plot than private and uncelebrated troubles to manage," said Schwartz in an interview last year.

A 68-year-old divorced man named Charlie extends a helping hand to a "migratory" couple expecting a child in "Bless Everybody." He lives on 200 acres along the Colorado-Wyoming border. Charlie has a strained relationship with his ex-wife and the story is laced with a low-grade tension between the two of them. Perhaps the drifters are giving Charlie a chance to shine. The drifters drive a Volkswagen bus with bald tires and "its grill had picked up a couple of tumbleweeds and was chewing on them like too much spaghetti in a child's mouth." But then the husband of the questionable couple wounds a deer—with a pistol—out of season. The mounting dread is palpable. The story neatly builds layers of ethical questions and basic human desires.

In "Stranger," Elaine is flying back to Denver after helping her sister deal with her father's estate in Philadelphia. But her flight is delayed and she's stuck at the airport. And someone clips her wallet while she naps and she lurches into a world of uncertainty. She is "in a state," as her husband Richard, back home in Denver, likes to say. She's also in world of opportunity, given everything, and peers hard around the corner at another self, where "the idea of limits had become just that, an idea."

"Seeing Miles" is the story of a Denver psychologist named David who is about to get reacquainted with a second cousin, Mimi. He knew Mimi as a teenager and was smitten with her "regal aloofness" and the "long white curve" of her throat. But not Mimi is a he—Miles. And he works hard to see the old Mimi and the new Miles, just as he works hard to figure out the rules about being around—acting normally—around his transgendered relative. "He'd been riveted by Mimi, by her elusive sylph beauty, her slender jaw and sinuous lips that reminded him of graceful Arabic script. He could still see a delicate handsomeness in the man now." Dredging up the teenage memories, and chatting with the Miles, carries implication for the home life. David is "keen on others' wounds" and drawn to loneliness—yet he and his Rose (a great choice of names) are trying for another child. The emotions are deftly layered.

In my mind, every single writer on the planet would dig the multi-layered "Galisteo Street" and its themes of rejection and loss. Ben is a writer but hasn't published anything in a decade. "The gap between success and being forgotten had widened with thoroughbred speed and people had stopped asking about a new book." He teaches writing now (part-time) and considers it "transitional retirement." He reads, chops woods, takes yoga, tends tomatoes. Years ago, he'd fathered a child and gave her up for adoption. He didn't meet the child, Lydia, until she was eleven. The mother of Lydia is Marilyn and she's the daughter of an unnamed literary star. And here's where it gets complicated. The last book Ben published was memoir of his time with

the troubled Marilyn and it drew lousy reviews. Of course, it outsold his fiction due to its “prurient interest” but what matters is the reaction has caused a serious disruption in his productivity. Now, as the story starts, Ben hears that Lydia, the daughter he abandoned, has had a baby. Ben and his wife Sunny drive to Santa Fe to close circles. Or something. To clean the slate? To look for forgiveness? He needs to get unblocked so he can start writing again. It’s all neatly interwoven, the artist and his actions, the teacher and his lessons—both the ones he preaches and the ones he chooses to ignore.

The three stories that wrap up the collection—“Opposite Ends of the World,” “Blockage” and “The Theory of Everything”—are dynamite. Again, writers will relate to the hunger and frustration of the set-up in “Blockage,” in which our erstwhile novelist has chucked his fiction dreams and is now a dental supply salesman. (Now, that's just sad.)

Schwartz knows the heart of a frustrated writer and there is, in fact, no reason that these stories aren’t in regular rotation on the reading lists of those who enjoy Alice Munro or, say, Ron Carlson. “Little Raw Souls,” by the way, won the Colorado Book Award this year (2014). It should win national awards, in my mind, too.

Every story feels fresh—and alive. They are efficient and energetic. The writing is beautiful. The style is understated with a sparkle of poetry here and there—flashes that reveal restraint. Prose takes a backseat to the humanity, the individual and their “uncelebrated troubles.”
