

Book Notes Rabbi Steven Rubenstein

I've read interviews with a variety of Jewish authors--that is, authors who are Jewish. Some notable ones such as Philip Roth clearly consider themselves simply authors (without the designation Jewish). They'd prefer that their work be considered against the background of world literature or American literature. I can understand that. From a creative perspective (not to mention a commercial perspective) this could make sense. As a reader, I find that locating the sub-genres within my reading helps me understand the work best. In the case of John K. Clayton this was a simple matter.

I hadn't heard of John K. Clayton until I read a review in *The Jewish Review Of Books*, a quarterly in the style of the *New York Review of Books*. I highly recommend it for those interested in what is going on in the world of Jewish books. Check it out here: www.jrb.org.

Clayton's short story collection *Many Seconds Into The Future* is definitely a JEWISH book. While not every story in *Many Seconds Into The Future* is centered on an explicitly Jewish theme, Clayton's interest in Jewish life and faith come out clearly in several stories. "Reading To Jacob" explores the emotional process of mourning and healing. Michael, a confirmed skeptic has lost his younger brother Jacob, who was a victim of a violent crime. To connect with his brother, Michael finds himself saying Kaddish, reading to Jacob, and pondering his connection to a spiritual life which he had earlier dismissed.

In "The Name Changer", Clayton explores the tradition of changing the Hebrew name of someone who is gravely ill. Is this superstition or a meaningful change in life? Clayton reaches for answers by asking the question, what does life after a dramatic recovery look like?

This is a book full of relationships--marriages (good ones and very bad ones), affairs, fathers and sons, brothers, and a good bit of loss. Even within the sadness of strained and broken relationships, Clayton finds beauty, hope, and meaning without forcing his characters into sugary or pat endings. He doesn't insist on tying up loose ends. Most of these stories take place in contemporary America (especially the Boston area) with a final, touching story about a teenager in the 1930's. Clayton has a wonderful way of bringing his characters off the page. I really enjoyed getting to know them--I think you will too.