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“Fiction”

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Graeme Williamson, a Canadian with Scottish roots best known to his fellow countrymen as a member and one of the founders (1979) of the Pukka Orchestra band, was also a poet, an academic, and a writer. He passed away in Glasgow in 2020. There is much appreciation among music critics and scholars of Williamson’s and his band members’ politically critical song lyrics, such as music critiques found on allmusic.com and rateyourmusic.com, as well as the occasional scholarly article (such as Victor Kennedy’s 2020 “Breaking Taboos in 1980s Toronto New Wave Music”). However, one of Williamson’s underappreciated fortes was writing short stories that conjure up a Kafkaesque veil between the plot and reality. The stories are all accessible on Williamson’s personal website under “Fiction.”

The short story “Memoirs of An Amnesiac,” first published in *The Dalhousie Review* in 1999, is about a man called McNab and his novel way of battling memory loss. He aids himself with a notebook, which later grows into an entire network of notebooks, but the sheer volume of things to note down becomes ever more unmanageable:

This respite was short-lived, however, for as time passed his memory deteriorated still further. He kept all his appointments but he now began to forget personal details about his friends, sometimes even their names, and what distinguished them from the bank manager, or people in stores. He started larger notebooks, filled with biographical sketches of his friends, illustrated when possible with a photograph. He listed the subject matter of their conversations when they met, the friends’ personal qualities, preferred style of clothing, distinguishing features and so forth.

A similar concept can be observed in the 2000 movie *Memento* directed by Christopher Nolan, which was based on a short story entitled “Memento Mori” written by his brother Jonathan. Both stories highlight the complexity and vital life necessity of a working memory and both manage to portray the feeling of helplessness, loss of life and the murky veil of confusion resulting from such an ailment. In Williamson’s story, McNab fights the descent into forgetfulness tooth and nail, and does get



some help along the way, only to be taken advantage of in the end. The story hints at the theme of what we might call ‘under-appreciated-artist-ness.’ An expression of the author himself? Possibly, and definitely something to look for when reading this tale of amnesia.

Williamson’s “Nostalgia,” first published in *The Knuckle End: An Anthology of Emerging Scottish Literary Talent* (2004), is another story about the rollercoaster of memories and transfers through the veil of how we choose to remember things, how they make us feel, how others’ memories evoke emotions, resulting in a bizarre state between reality and realisation. This “I enter a psychic slumber as Dora wraps me in the poisoned blanket of the past” is an indication that memories may serve as both dangerous escapism and a weapon of manipulation. The story briefly follows the narrator and his wife Dora through a seemingly drunken stupor that is presented as a kind of everyday chore: go out, get a bottle of whisky, hurry home to the wife. We are torn between seeing the narrator as a drunkard or possibly a psychotic man; he meets a mysterious character outside of the apartment who goes home with him and later we hear him proclaim to his wife that there is a man in the kitchen who looks like himself. Is this existential self-realisation after looking at his life or just an alcohol-fuelled hallucination? Williamson leaves the ending open to the reader’s interpretation.

A third story, “The Sixth Tier,” begun in 1973, continued in 2010, and left to be scrutinized and revised by the author, evokes a sense of mystery regarding reality perspectives. The narrator lives in a quiet world of his own which is marked by simple sounds surrounding him and imaginary people who are shrouded in correct and incorrect states of reality. His lack of a “grasp on life” takes him out of his job and home to a mysterious place where people sleep and function on benches, in rows and tiers, and again we cannot distinguish through the veil where he ends up. Homelessness, asylum, a dream world? This is a psychologically matter-of-fact unhinged mystery worthy of observation.

Graham Williamson’s time in the public eye was definitely more prominent through his music career with the Pukka Orchestra, producing hits like “Listen to the Radio,” “Rubber Girl,” and “Cherry Beach Express,” but his short fiction impact should definitely follow suit. His stories are a kind of mind-boggling maze and they force readers to go on a psychedelic trip of figuring out what is actually going on and where it is actually going on. Do they simply reflect the confusion of existence we all sometimes seem to encounter but are trying to forget at the same time? Those questions remain to be answered, but Williamson’s strange, veiled tales will definitely raise the occasional “What!?” from their readers and will transport them to another realm.