



# The Torturer's Apprentice: Stories

*John Biguenet*

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This brilliant debut collection of stories by O. Henry Award winner John Biguenet is as notable for the rigor of its intellect as for the sweep of its imagination. Whether recounting the predicament of an atheistic stigmatic in "The Vulgar Soul" or a medieval torturer who must employ his terrible skills upon his own apprentice in the title tale, these stories decline to settle for ready sentiments or easy assurances.

Rather than add to the massive canon of the victimized, for example, "My Slave" takes the perspective of the victimizer. In "The Open Curtain," a man achieves intimacy with his family only when he recognizes -- watching them dine as he sits in his car at the curb -- that he lives in a household of strangers. Menaced by a gang of skinheads in a Jewish cemetery, an American tourist in Germany placates the Neo-Nazis with a formula he continues to repeat even after he is safely back home in "I Am Not a Jew." And as for love, it makes demands in such stories as "Do Me" that shake our very notions of what it means to love.

If these stories engage the world in sometimes shocking ways, they are virtuoso engagements, eloquent in their prose, surprising in their plotting, sly in their humor. Biguenet shifts among voices and narrative strategies and imposes neither a single style nor a repeated structure as he depicts the ecological catastrophe of "A Plague of Toads," the problem posed by a ghost in the nursery in "Fatherhood," and the ghastly discovery a grieving widower defends as "another kind of memory" in "Rose."

Such mastery of craft may come as a surprise in a first-time author, but even more impressive is the object of his art. For whether it seeks to prick or to tickle, each story in *The Torturer's Apprentice* addresses its subject with an authority unusual in contemporary literature as it entices the reader beyond the boundaries of the expected and the accepted.

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