



What Happens Next?: Matters of Life and Death (Iowa and the Midwest Experience)

Douglas Bauer

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What is life about but the continuous posing of the questions: what happens next, and what do we make of it when it arrives? In these highly evocative personal essays, Douglas Bauer weaves together the stories of his own and his parents' lives, the meals they ate, the work and rewards and regrets that defined them, and the inevitable betrayal by their bodies as they aged.

His collection features at its center a long and memory-rich piece seasoned with sensory descriptions of the midday dinners his mother cooked for her farmer husband and father-in-law every noon for many years. It's this memoir in miniature that sets the table for the other stories that surround it—of love and bitterness, of hungers served and denied. Good food and marvelous meals would take on other revelatory meanings for Bauer as a young man, when he met, became lifelong friends with, and was tutored in the pleasures of an appetite for life by M. F. K. Fisher, the century's finest writer in English on "the art of eating," to borrow one of her titles.

The unavoidable companion of the sensual joys of food and friendship is the fragility and ultimately the mortality of the body. As a teenager, Bauer courted sports injuries to impress others, sometimes with his toughness and other times with his vulnerability. And as happens to all of us, eventually his body began to show the common signs of wear—cataracts, an irregular heartbeat, an arthritic knee. That these events might mark the arc of his life became clear when his mother, a few months shy of eighty-seven, slipped on some ice and injured herself.

In these clear-eyed, wry and graceful essays, Douglas Bauer presents with candor and humor the dual calendars of his own mortality and that of his aging parents, evoking the regrets and affirmations inherent in being human.

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