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THE SHORT HISTORY OF A PRINCE

By Jane Hamilton

Random House; 347 pp.

Although perhaps best known for her superb debut novel, *The Book of Ruth*, it would be a shame if only that title springs to mind as we follow the career of the enormously gifted Jane Hamilton, now entering her full artistic maturity.

With each successive book, Hamilton's tone has deepened, her large-souled empathy has broadened, and her prose grown so lyrical that few could dispute her place among the finest writers of our time.

One mark of Hamilton's sophisticated artistry is her rapidly-evolving ability to work against the grain of stereotype and expectation. Ruth, the sympathetic if mildly complicit victim of abuse and violence, was almost easy, the stuff of talk shows; Oprah said as much to Hamilton on television. With Alice Godwin in the powerful *Map of the World*, however, Hamilton took a major step forward, eliciting enormous sympathy for a woman who, in the novel's opening pages, has inattentively allowed her best friend's daughter to drown.

Hamilton's third novel, *The Short History of a Prince*, marks yet another leap in sophistication, her most profound and compassionate work yet.

At its center is Walter McCloud, who seems at first to offer small ground on which to build affection.

We see half the novel through Walter's 38 year-old eyes. Approaching the portal to middle-age, he is drifting, as he has been all his life. Gay and alone, the man who spent his youth loving ballet and wanting to dance the part of Prince Siegfried in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* has returned to the rural Wisconsin where he spent his boyhood summers. Now, he teaches high school English to farm kids who "had no interest in books, no interest, it seemed, in thought." Yet slowly, almost subliminally, he learns from them.

They mirror to him the 15 year-old Walter had been in 1973, through whose viewpoint the other half of the novel's chapters are related. That bookish, hypersensitive aspiring dancer presents Hamilton's challenge: to make us agonize for a teenager often supercilious and pompous, mired in self-absorption while his older brother dies slowly from Hodgkin's Disease.

Feeling increasingly isolate as his dying brother becomes the focus of their parents' attention, wanting only to dance the role the prince and gain the love of his friend Mitch, Walter finds that even when his dreams come true they do so in painful and

humiliating ways. Even his most benevolent friend, Susan, seems to desert him for his dying brother, with whom she has fallen in love.

"If life for Walter was composed of confusion, shame and deception, the ballet was order, dignity and forthright beauty," yet he has no real talent for it. Although he worships Mitch, Mitch will use, embarrass and betray him. Oddly, it is Susan, from whom in pique he'd become estranged, who will prove his angel of redemption, though he will be agonizingly slow to realize it.

An atypical teenager, Walter's intense teenaged angst is not atypical. More distressing is how it continues to age 38. Even by then, "Walter had never lived in a place as an adult that he could think of as his community." He fears he has "the fiber of a sentimental old lady." Even his boyhood family home may be sold out from under him.

Yet, in richly textured prose glacial in its steady power, Hamilton allows Walter to see hope for the remains of his day, partly through the unwavering friendship of Susan, and always with an integrity that never veers toward the banal or clichéd.

Through the candid accretion of closely observed incident and detail, the outsider Walter McCloud's story becomes not only poignantly moving but becomes our story, neither heroic nor anti-heroic, just palpably human. Through him, we see that most of our apocalypses take place in a teacup, that our private pains make us sensitive to others' suffering, that we can not only recognize our limitations but embrace them, and that even all our well-intentioned failures add up to a life worth living.

A Short History of a Prince is one of our finest writers doing what our finest writers do best: opening a window to view who we are.