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DIFFICULTIES OF A BRIDEGROOM

By Ted Hughes

176 pp. : Picador

Eminent though Ted Hughes is, the world will little note nor long remember England's reigning poet laureate as a writer of short fiction. Even Mr. Hughes admits that these nine stories--all but two of which were written no later than 1962--are merely "an accompaniment to my poems." While most of these pieces lack the depth of characterization that can make fiction absorbing, they convey gripping incidents brightened by the poet's shimmering wash of rich-hued imagery. The earliest, "O'Kelly's Angel" (1954), reveals the base elements in humanity unleashed when man confronts the numinous, as O'Kelly captures an angel, inspiring in turn mass reverence, superstition, factionalism, insurrection and war. The most original story idea may lie in "The Wound," a radio play in which a soldier treks through what he thinks is "a windy desert of raw yellow mustard dust, with an immovable sun like 250 watt bulbs pressed lit on to your eyeballs" but what may be the Buddhist path leading from death to rebirth. A poignant trilogy of stories depict Mr. Hughes's South Yorkshire boyhood. He'd feasted on these beautifully evoked landscapes with a Wordsworthian appetite but remembers most vividly their menacing horses, murdered rabbits and showmen who catch rats in their teeth and kill them for an audience bearing vestiges of a people whose idea of fun was bearbaiting. If only partially successful as stories, these pieces offer intriguing peeks into the mind of one of our important contemporary poets.