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The Earth and the Sky

By Debbie Lee Wesselman

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Although Debbie Lee Wesselman sets the 15 stories of her insightful, elegant collection all over the globe, few of her characters can find a place where they are connected to the human family. Many get whisked to opposite ends of the earth, some face unscalable language barriers, and some, like Elisabetta in the title story, confess, "I felt homesick, even though I stood on my own property." In the most poignant stories, isolation springs from internal incompleteness. Ellen, the American wife living in her husband's Japan, "had come to think of a life as a series of little string pieces knotted together, one at a time, to form a misshapen doll." Father Paolo in "Rosa's Vision" has been a priest for three decades but "had not an inkling of exactly what spirituality was." Several stories are intertwined. "Life As a Dragon" and the powerful "Stone Daughter" present mirror images of women dragged thousands of miles by marriage. Two stories set in Taiwan culminate with their protagonists witnessing the same horrible scene. Two others are linked by Ms. Wesselman's convincing use of male viewpoints to explore the father/son bond. The most searing story is set in the heart of America, "Core Puncher," about a Rhode Island woman who'd lost her daughter to bone cancer and now chases tornadoes because only something that powerful can reach through all the scar tissue surrounding her heart. If there's an occasional error of excess--"His lungs, his heart, his mind are paralyzed by a javelin of pain" --it is only because this impressive writer consistently aims high.