



## A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies

By John Murray  
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### Introduction

Trembling below the surface of John Murray's elegant and accomplished short stories are elements of violence, deceit, betrayal, and despair. Yet these are not highly charged tales throbbing with densely emotional prose. The writing is controlled, sometimes Chekovian in its eloquence, often reminiscent of Hemingway's affecting restraint. The result is a riveting, richly layered and satisfying collection that challenges readers to place themselves in the lives of characters whose predicaments and choices lead us inexorably toward our own.

Each of these eight stories places readers at the treacherous intersection where chaos meets order. In "The Hill Station," a young microbiologist gains a fuller understanding of death, disease, and her own life when she witnesses the ravaged lives and despairing faces of those for whom cholera is more than germs swimming under a microscope. Legacies of obsession and classification haunt the narrator of "A

Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies," in which an older plastic surgeon discovers how his need for order has led him to shut a door on his own feelings of guilt and loss, and "Acts of Memory, Wisdom of Man," in which a teen-aged boy finds himself torn between his mother's spiritual awakening and his father's religious devotion to science. "All the Rivers in the World" and "Watson and the Shark" portray characters whose desire to save others' lives leads them to discover the darkest parts of their own, while "Blue" plums the depths of that darkness against a pristine, almost heavenly background.

Numerous strains tie these stories together: sons and daughters of immigrants rediscovering their cultural roots; adult children searching their own lives for answers to their parents' bewildering, painful actions; characters who steel themselves in the face of death, only to find themselves more vulnerable than they could have imagined; men and women who want to save the world while their own lives lie in pieces at their feet. And while all the stories show us people whose lives have been touched by loss, illness and death, Murray also manages to imbed in each story a kind of geography lesson: of the world, of human anatomy, of the human spirit.

A doctor as well as a writer, John Murray subtly and convincingly brings a scientific perspective to each of his character's lives. In one story he details the evolutionary development of insects as well as the invidious architecture of a brain tumor. He brings us into the clinics and operating rooms of third-world communities where violence and disease take their toll on the doctors as well as their patients. And he shows us highly educated medical professionals who still have a lot to learn about the inner workings of their own hearts.

The settings of these stories span the globe, with characters and styles equally diverse. But throughout the collection, Murray reveals again and again a wonderful truth: Our lives are as fragile as a butterfly's wing. In a world in which order and disorder coexist, we cannot embrace one without the other. It is a lesson many of us often forget, especially when we are blindsided with the painful consequences of our own or others' actions. But like all organic things, we persist, against overwhelming odds, to live.

### Discussion Questions

#### The Hill Station

1. How do Elizabeth's choices - destroying her diaphragm, traveling to India, helping with the cholera epidemic, marrying the man she met on the bus - indicate how she struggles between chaos and order?
2. How does Elizabeth's work researching disease affect the way she looks at the world?

#### All the Rivers in the World

1. Why do you think Vitek's father is drawn to Chika?
2. Chika tells Vitek that "nothing really matters . . . except what you do in those few moments when you have to put yourself on the line for others, to overcome your own fear." (67) What does this observation mean in Chika's life? What does it come to mean to Vitek?

#### A Few Short Notes on Tropical Butterflies

1. What do butterflies - and butterfly collecting - have to do with the themes of this story?
2. How does the story within the story - the narrator's grandfather's experiences tracking tropical butterflies in Africa - illuminate aspects of the narrator's personality and past experiences?

#### White Flour

1. By revealing piecemeal the facts behind Joseph's father's departure, the truth behind his mother's deception emerges slowly. What is the effect of this method of storytelling?
2. What kind of future do you foresee for Joseph?

#### Watson and the Shark

1. As the narrator examines a boy critically wounded by machete-wielding soldiers, he "could see that every eye was fixed on me and I felt that sense of power and control that I needed then - this was why I was a trauma surgeon - and I wanted life-or-death, all-or-nothing situations. Life or death. That was why I was there in the jungle, and I honestly had a tremendous feeling of being in the right place and of being filled with a certain glorious energy." (137) How does the narrator's image of himself change by the end of the story? What causes this change?

2. How does the painting "Watson and the Shark" illustrate the story's major themes?

### **The Carpenter Who Looked Like a Boxer**

1. Here, again, Murray has chosen to save vital information - truths about Danny's wife and father - for the end of the story. As truths are revealed, how do your impressions of Danny and his predicament change?
2. What does the idea of termites invading the house that Danny built - and his neighbors' obsessive concern about the insects - represent in the story? Why is it important that Danny built this house himself, for his wife and his family?

### **Blue**

1. How is Simon's quest to reach the mountain summit driven by the death of his father years before?
2. How does Simon's role in his father's death compare with his role in the deaths of his fellow climbers?

### **Acts of Memory, Wisdom of Man**

1. The title of this story is echoed in the words of the narrator's mother, who cautions him that "Acts of memory are the wisdom of man." At the same time, his father tells him "All meaning depends on a set of arbitrary rules and laws." What does each of these statements mean to you? How do they define the story's central conflict?
2. Who, in the long run, has the most impact on Harry's life - his mother or his father?

### **General Questions for Discussion**

1. In reviewing all the stories, what sorts of experiences do Murray's characters have in saving others and being saved? What happens to those who have an opportunity to save and can't - or won't?
2. Generally speaking, what kinds of relationships do the parents in Murray's stories have with their children? What do these children learn from their parents' actions?
3. How does Murray portray doctors and other people in the medical profession? What sense do his stories give you about science's ability to save lives, or change them for the better? What inherent weaknesses and strengths do medical professionals possess?
4. What parallels can be drawn between the duties of parents to their children and the duties of doctors to their patients?
5. How and why is setting important to these stories?
6. What have you learned about what life is like in India and Africa? Do Murray's depictions of these countries contradict your own notions of them?