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# Losing It

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Virginity, rather like nostalgia, is not what it used to be ? and writing about the loss of it (even, or especially, for teenagers) is not going to cause the rumpus it might once have done. It may, therefore, be the case that for many of today?s young readers the eight short stories comprising Keith Gray?s anthology will do little more than elicit a cynical ?So what?? But, undoubtedly, there will be others for whom they will still have at least some degree of resonance and relevance. The formidable combined talents of Gray himself, Melvin Burgess, Anne Fine, Mary Hooper, Sophie McKenzie, Patrick Ness, Bali Rai and Jenny Valentine certainly succeed in investing their subject matter with both stylistic and thematic variety and although the overall tone of the collection is quite serious (the Hooper and Rai stories, for example, are minor masterpieces of viscerally powerful writing) there are some delightfully humorous moments also: Fine?s story, with its beautifully observed contemporary classroom setting ? condoms, bananas and hapless teachers ? and its wistful evocation of earlier days and earlier attitudes, manages to be both witty and poignant. But if we are in the business of distributing merit badges, then Ness?s story, ?Different for Boys?, must run off with the top award. On the surface it may simply be seen as yet another (but here very accomplished) attempt to address the ?growing up gay? theme in adult fiction. But, much more than this, it is a tender, clever and stylistically teasing exploration of adolescent difference and, above all, loneliness. ?We just sit there? for a long, long time,? says Ant, its narrator, ?letting night fall outside, not saying anything at all, just the two of us sitting there, waiting for the month or year or whenever in our lives when we?re allowed to stop being lonely.? The pain of youthful yearning is not often as succinctly conveyed.

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