

***Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha: New and Selected Stories***

by Edward Falco

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About the Book

The fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, musicians, artists, runaways, born-again Christians, alcoholics, thieves, professors and Vietnam Vets that populate *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha* go much deeper than the gloss of television or the veneer of newspaper articles ever allow. Falco's characters are likable people in tough circumstances; they are people at risk. Sometimes they succumb, but many times they overcome difficult situations to provide stability and keep their families safe.

The voices of Falco's characters quickly pull us into their complicated lives. These stories raise questions about love and sex, parents and children, good and evil and last, but not least, about the nature of reality itself. Many of these characters are sinners who gracefully discover the sacred as they struggle through the profane.

"For too long," writes Alice Fulton, "Ed Falco has been a 'writer's writer.' With this collection, more readers can know the profound pleasures of his work. He is, quite simply, a great artist of the story...." Falco's stories have been compared to those of Flannery O'Connor, Andre Dubus and Raymond Carver. Like these masters of short fiction, Falco is unflinchingly honest. His scrupulous writing is concerned with both where we've been and where we're going. His plots are never predictable and his characters are vital and real.

About the Author

Edward Falco's stories have appeared in many of our finest literary journals including *Atlantic Monthly* and *Glimmer Train* and have been included in *Best American Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize* anthologies. He's the author of two previous short story collections including *Plato at Scratch* *Daniel's* and *Acid* and his novel *Wolf Point* is forthcoming from Unbridled Books. Falco grew up in Brooklyn and now teaches writing and literature at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia. In addition to his accomplishments in traditional fiction, Falco writes hypertext fiction and is the editor of the hypertext journal *The New River*. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/journals/newriver/>

Questions for Discussion

1. In the collection *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha*, fathers take their roles as protectors seriously. The fathers in "The Instruments of Peace" "The Match" "The Revenant" "Acid" and "The Artist" all overcome their own weaknesses in order to protect their families—especially their children—from harm. What about today's culture causes these fathers to worry for their children? Do you think these fathers are right to be concerned?
2. The relationship between fathers and their adolescent children is at the center of many of these stories. In "The Instruments of Peace" Paul Deegan tries to keep his daughter Amy away from mysterious Chad Barnnett and fails. In "The Professor's Son" the son provokes his mother's lover, but it is the boy's imperturbable father, the professor, who fights him. In "The Match" Mark is rattled by the constant challenges presented by his blue-haired daughter. And in "Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha," Chris advises his father, Matt, to cut the cord with *his* parents. How would you describe the balance of power between parent and child in these stories? Why is adolescence such a complicated time for both parents and teenagers?
3. How the past affects the present is a theme of this collection. In "Small Blessings," Connie has several lesbian relationships behind her when she realizes,

- “I want a man.” In “The Revenant” Jeff’s encounter with a teenage girl at a concert causes him to reflect on his service in Vietnam. In “Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha” Matt’s simultaneous roles as father and son flummox him. In “Gifts” Joseph ponders his son’s comment six years after his son’s death. When Tony shows up in Jim’s kitchen in “The Artist” he threatens the new life Jim has created. How does the past affect these characters? Are the characters self-aware enough to use lessons from the past to shape their futures?
4. Like the fiction of Flannery O’Connor, Andre Dubus and Raymond Carver, some of Edward Falco’s stories explore violence in the lives of “normal” people. Mobsters spoil Paul Deegan’s bucolic farm in “The Instruments of Peace.” Matt and Janice swallow cocaine-filled condoms in “Smugglers.” In “Radon” three teenage friends rob houses. Vance Howell is almost strangled in “The Professor’s Son.” Fists fly in “Drunks” and “The Artist” features a frozen cop in a freezer. What circumstances have contributed to such risky environments for otherwise ordinary people? How do these characters respond?
 5. Sex is complicated in Falco’s stories. In “Sweet” Winston falls in love with a teenage runaway. In “Smugglers” Matt finds sex but wants love. In “Tulsa Snow” Bob learns that Jesse’s entire body has been altered by cosmetic surgery. In “Monsters” a young poet dreams of making love with a girl, but becomes an accomplice to her rape instead. In “Silver Dollars” a little boy is on his way to becoming a hustler. In “Acid” Jerome is married to Sylvia but is attracted to Alice; he decides not to have a relationship with her because “it wasn’t the way he lived.” What are some of the choices about sex these characters make? What do you think sex means to each of them?
 6. Some of Edward Falco’s characters seem to actually court danger. Matt risks his life in “Smugglers.” The teenagers in “Radon” rob houses for fun. In “Silver Dollars,” Coon gets involved with a sexual predator. In “Drunks” Rick agrees to a drink with a violent man. In “The Artist” Jim hides his former life from his

- wife, but then must reenter that life in order preserve his new one. Do you think the characters in these stories are aware of the risks they take? Is so, why do they agree to take them? If you don't think they are aware of the risks, what causes them to fail to see risks clearly?
7. Families fill the stories in this collection. Some of the stories suggest that families cause pain, while others suggest that families are sustaining. What do you think about the families in the stories "Radon" "The Professor's Son" "Silver Dollars" "The Match" and "The Revenant?" How do families impact the lives of the characters? Do the families and their conflicts seem authentic?
 8. Stories in *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha* are set in cities, suburbs, and the countryside. In "Gifts" the beauty of the natural world is a balm to a grieving father. In "The Artist" New York City serves as the dangerous counterpoint to the safety of Long Island. In "Radon" "Monsters" "Drunks" and "The Professor's Son" however, the suburbs and countryside are full of both beauty *and* menace. What do these stories suggest about life in the city versus life in the county? What makes life in one place preferable to life in the other?
 9. Things are not always what they seem in these stories: unpredictable plots turn and twist. In "The Instruments of Peace" Paul learns that he doesn't really know his friend Ollie. In "Sweet" a runaway teenage girl quotes Nietzsche. In "Tulsa Snow" Jessie's many secrets are skin deep, but Bob's go much deeper. In "Monsters," Mike thinks Train is a great guy; he thinks that way about himself, too, until their actions prove otherwise. In "Drunks" it takes an incomprehensible bum to alert Rick to the fact that Barney is truly dangerous. How would you conceptualize the main characters in these stories? Are they oblivious or simply trusting? Do their dilemmas and self-deceptions seem true-to life?
 10. *Kirkus Review* states that Edward Falco "writes tense, gritty fiction that portrays ordinary people caught between the claims of normal life and the lure of the

forbidden and untasted..." In stories such as "The Revenant" "Smugglers" and "Acid" the characters find themselves inside seductive worlds they may not want to leave. How strong are "the claims of normal life" on the characters in these stories? How do these characters deal with temptation and desire?

11. Several stories in *Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha* suggest that adults and teenagers live in different worlds. What happens when "adult" and "adolescent" worlds collide in stories such as "Radon" "The Match" "The Revenant" and "Sabbath Night in the Church of the Piranha"? What, if anything, can the adults and adolescents in these stories learn from one another?

Recommended Reading

Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*

Andre Dubus, *Selected Stories*

Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*

Mary Gaitskill, *Bad Behavior*

JD Salinger, *Nine Stories*

AM Homes, *Things You Should Know*

Juno Diaz, *Drown*

Beth Nugent, *City of Boys*