

*The Island*, by David Borofka

reviewed by [Sarah J. Fodor](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

*By David Borofka, The Island. (MacMurray & Back, 191 pp.)*

At first David Borofka's novelette *The Island* seems to fall into a well-worn category: that of a reminiscence about one's first summer romance. It re-creates those endless summers when we feel old enough to date but are not yet working a steady job. But Borofka deepens this subject by exploring issues of friendship and betrayal, forms of spirituality and questions about the possibilities of order in the universe.

Borofka's main character, 14-year-old "Fish" Becker, narrates the tale, providing an appropriate point of view for exploring the mysteries of existence. Fish's parents have shipped him off to stay with the family of his father's best friend, Miles Lambert, while the Beckers travel abroad to try to decide if they would rather get divorced or make another expensive purchase that would temporarily assuage their sense of incompatibility. With the Lamberts in Oregon, Fish experiences the close company of not one but two girls, one associated with body and one with spirit. Amanda meets Fish on the beach every night and allows him to explore her body so far and no further. Mira insists on exploring the spirit world with Fish through the medium of her Ouija board.

As in *Hints of His Mortality* (1996), a collection of stories that won the Iowa Short Fiction Award, Borofka crafts characters who are attracted to religious ritual and wonder about the meaning of things, but aren't comfortable with a commitment to faith. Mira uses her Ouija board to communicate with a dead cousin who is able to provide surprising and seemingly accurate answers about relationships and the possibility of an afterlife. At the same time, these characters are attracted to the rituals of doctrinal religion, taking comfort in liturgical language at weddings and funerals. Rather than providing answers to questions of faith, Borofka's work evokes the mysteries of existence and remains open to the possibility of God.

In this novel the status of temporal reality, like that of the numinous realm, is not straightforward or easy to figure out. Mira's mother believes in multiple, overlapping realities. The narrative bears her out by providing two alternative versions of her

pregnancy. One ends in a miscarriage caused by a train wreck, the other in Mira's healthy birth. The novel's structure, which intersperses events and perspectives from the past and the present with minimal narrative guidance, suggests that through the faculty of memory we often experience this sense of overlapping time.

Relationships are mysterious as well. Fish's mother was engaged to marry Mira's father until Miles Lambert's college roommate and best friend, Alan Becker, walked into her clothing store. Lambert and Becker remain friends, but the consequences of the betrayal ripple through time and generations, affecting the relationship between their sons. After Freddy Lambert decks Fish, Fish tells his dad, "The next time you hit someone . . . tell me when I need to duck."

Borofka insists on the timelessness of these issues of betrayal and reconciliation by alluding to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the title and the characterization. Miles presides over his estate like Prospero over his island. Like Prospero, he has been betrayed by those closest to him. A shipwreck brings Prospero's betrayers to the island; Fish's parents arrive at the estate after surviving a train wreck. Mira, short for Miranda (Prospero's daughter), becomes the friend of the usurper's son, echoing the friendship of Shakespeare's Miranda and Ferdinand. Miles's wife, Ariana, is "barely five feet tall, a sprite," suggesting a connection with Ariel. Freddie, loaded down with labors like Caliban, is punished for his rebellious independence. These allusions are evocative without being heavy-handed. Noticing these parallels and thinking about their possible meanings deepens the significance of the theme of betrayal.

Borofka's layers of thematic allusiveness remind one of the finely crafted poems and stories loved by the New Critics. His questions about chaos and order, and even Lambert's hobby of fiddling with radio parts, are reminiscent of the themes explored in Thomas Pynchon's novels: Do we live in a world ruled by entropy, or do the pieces come together in some kind of pattern? At the same time, the writing seems postmodern in its play with multiple, overlapping realities and its refusal of linear narrative. Even as it engages readers in thinking deeply, Borofka's writing is crisp, funny and inspiring.