

Benjamin Taylor

TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

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This engaging debut is not a long novel, but its themes of sexual awakening, inner religious conflict and the role of the artist in society are explored in considerable depth. The structure is episodic; the tales are woven together skilfully by their omniscient narrator. Set on Galveston Island during the lazy summer of 1907, they revolve around the Mehmels, a Jewish family whose dwindling fortune is founded on the Sweet Brook Brewery, and whose members and friends have much else to preoccupy them.

We are given a host of fine portraits and cameos. Felix Mehmel, an intelligent fourteen-year-old, given to "ten dollar words", is lost to Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*, as well as to

the ambiguous sexual pleasures being taught him by his classmate, Wick Frawley. Nathan Gernsbacher, the town's rabbi, is torn between the kabbalistic stories of his childhood and a more rational Judaism.

Into their world shambles Yankel Schmulowicz, a mute puppeteer, whose creations are magically lifelike, and whose sojourn echoes the biblical stories of Elijah. When he leaves, the gift of knowledge is firmly implanted in Felix's breast and the rabbi has turned humanist. What Felix learns, and the point of the narrator's metafiction reveals, is the value of storytelling, both as self-expression and as a means of understanding others.

The novel's form necessitates a pared-down style, yet its effects are, by turns, dryly humorous and moving, learned and colloquial, the tone lyrical, and the descriptions richly suggestive, particularly of landscape. Taylor's vision is an idealistic one, but it is none the less effective.

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