

The quiet guy

BY CLAIRE DEDERER

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THE HA-HA, by Dave King. Little, Brown, 340 pp., \$23.95.

What's the appeal of an inarticulate hero? Lately, we've been seeing books peopled by the tongue-tied and the ill-spoken. The protagonist of Mark Haddon's "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" and the love interest in Margot Livesey's "Banishing Verona" both have Asperger's syndrome; both speak in cadences far from fluid. Jonathan Lethem's detective in "Motherless Brooklyn" speaks a language textured by Tourette's.

Dave King goes these authors one further with his new novel, "The Ha-Ha." Thirty years ago, Howie Kapostash almost got his head blown off in Vietnam. Ever since, he's been unable to speak or even write. He can shrug and nod and gesture, but language is unavailable to him. Inside his hideously scarred head, though, Howie is fully functional. He narrates the book, and we get the privilege of peering out at the world along with him.

For a person who can't talk, Howie gets along pretty well. He does odd jobs and mows the lawn for the nuns at a nearby convent. He lives in his childhood home with a bunch of indifferent housemates. He has an on-again, off-again friendship with his skittish high school sweetheart, Sylvia, who's grown up to be a single mom and a cokehead, not necessarily in that order.

In the novel's opening scene, Sylvia's sister swoops in to perform an intervention. About to be trundled off to rehab, Sylvia calls Howie in the middle of the night and asks him to look after her 9-year-old, Ryan. Howie considers his potential as a surrogate parent: "Actually, I'm not a bad choice when it comes to child care, even if no one's asked me before. There's nothing wrong with my intellect or judgment, and my steady gig, maintenance at the convent, makes for a flexible schedule. Living on disability, I'm home a lot, and I run a stable household and keep my nose clean. ... If I don't utterly love life, so what?"

Everyone who reads this book will have a different moment when Howie becomes that irresistible force, a narrator you'd follow anywhere. It won't be a pyrotechnic kind of moment; Howie's not that kind of guy. He's more the type to exert a quiet, stubborn tug. That moment came for me early in the book, that first night when Howie brings the frightened boy back to his house. As he puts the boy to bed, he wonders if he ought to kiss him good night. "He and I don't have a kissy relationship, and I'm not wishing to start one. But I believe I'll do whatever's right."

Howie's desire to do whatever's right, his ambivalence, his blunt way of seeing things - these qualities make him a wonderful companion. His voice keeps us reading even as we move into what could be a saccharine plot: poor black kid brings hope and love to a lonely man. In fact, throughout the book, King's plot pushes at the limits of our patience and even our belief. Strangely, though, all the while Howie himself continues to seem real, human and indelible - he's a fully realized character who has to put up with the vagaries of a not-quite-fully realized plot. It's a paradoxical testament to King's powers that we get annoyed at the author on his narrator's behalf: Howie deserves better!

King, fortunately, has the wit not to push his plot forward too quickly. Howie doesn't all of a sudden become a kind of mute Bill Cosby, wearing cozy sweaters and silently effervescing joie de vivre. Slowly, he allows his life to be sweetened by Ryan's presence. The household finds itself drawn together by the boy, at first meeting over breakfast in the mornings before Ryan heads off to school. Howie's roommates, once a faceless trio of rent payers, separate out into individual people: Stevie and Harrison, two buddies who paint houses and crack dumb jokes, and Laurel, a Vietnamese cowgirl who makes soup for a living. As spring turns into summer and Ryan's mom remains stuck in rehab, the housemates constellate into a group around the polestar of the little boy. Together or in pairs they hit the movies, the water park and Ryan's baseball practices.

Howie, isolated for so long, finds these outings bittersweet. At Ryan's end-of-year school assembly, he senses his future lying in wait for him: "Two moms are packing up choir robes, and I realize that for them, today is simply the stuff of life. They'll have other assemblies, plenty of chances for volunteering, perhaps even more children. But for me this day is unlikely to repeat. Sometime Ryan will go back to Sylvia, and if I come here again, I'll be a hanger-on."

Of course King isn't about to let that happen. There are two simultaneous revelations of character unfolding here: We readers get to know Howie from the inside, as we listen in on his mind whirring away. Meanwhile, the people in Howie's life get to know him on the outside, through his actions. He messes up often enough to keep things interesting, but by the novel's end his devotion to Ryan has impressed the people in his life, and he gets his due reward.

Maybe that's the appeal of a fictional character who can't talk. In a world that never shuts up, where every event is spun, a silent character possesses an inarguable integrity. It's a rare pleasure to spend time with someone so utterly incapable of being a hypocrite.

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