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TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Monday, Jan. 31, 2005

Moving Beyond Words

In a very fine debut novel, a man who cannot speak intelligibly tries to connect to a boy in distress

By RICHARD LACAYO

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Howie Kapostash is an alert man with a nuanced awareness of things. He enjoys the increments of summer sunlight or the nice construction of a simple lunch box. He also spots the looks that pass between people when they notice his forehead. A Vietnam War injury has left him with a deep indentation in his skull and a messy plug of scar tissue. The wound has all but deprived him of the power of speech. Anytime he tries to talk, the best he can do is bark out one or two syllables. "I gave up explaining years ago," he says, in the gently lyrical interior monologue that makes up Dave King's *The Ha-Ha* (Little, Brown; 340 pages). By the time we come upon him in thickening middle age, Howie has pretty much given up venturing beyond the placid, meaty enclosure of himself. "Not," he tells us, "is the one word I can dependably force out."

The Ha-Ha is a very skilled first novel, a book full of deep feeling rendered with light, sure strokes. It's also one more variation, but a lovely one, on a very old story form, the sensitive heart trapped in a monster's body. Think of *Beauty and the Beast* or *Boo Radley*, the well-meaning neighborhood oddity in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Howie doesn't so much frighten people--the scar's not that bad--as weary them. It's so difficult for him to communicate that everyone else just finds it easier to leave him mired in his isolation. So does he. Because he's the book's narrator, we know all about his low-key wit and the sharp, sure turnings of his mind. Bystanders have to make do with the reassurance printed on the business cards he brings out to explain his muteness: PLEASE REMEMBER: I AM OF NORMAL INTELLIGENCE!

Three decades or so after his injury, Howie lives in his boyhood home in a Midwestern town that could be Cleveland, Ohio. With both his parents dead, he has a makeshift family of housemates that includes Nit and Nat, affable slacker lunkheads, and Laurel Cao, a level-headed, sexy Vietnamese American from Texas who makes gourmet soups for sale to local shops. He also has a steady, undemanding job doing maintenance and yard work for a local convent. What he does not have is any particular

hope for the future.

Then his high school sweetheart Sylvia, en route to rehab for her cocaine problem, abruptly drops off Ryan, 9, her son by another man. Shaken out from the shambles of Sylvia's life into Howie's barely more ordered household, Ryan inserts himself warily into what everyone knows will be a short-term arrangement. Seasoned readers, or TV-movie viewers, may suspect they see what's coming here. Needy, difficult boy meets needy, remote man. And while it's true that before the last page, hugs are hugged and a few lessons are learned, King is deeply mindful that life works imperfectly when it works at all. He feels his way into Howie and Ryan's predicaments with a sympathy that never descends into pathos, even as Howie spirals into the emotional crisis of the book's final stretch.

But no emotional crisis is really required. It's the simple detail of Howie's day-to-day measured existence that propels this book forward. It's enough that King etches so expertly the fine filigree of the man's resignation and pain, his awareness of the "burden of my dullness"--which the reader understands is just the world's inability to find its way into his steady, lustrous stream of consciousness. At one point, trying to muster sympathy for Sylvia's addiction, he recollects his own druggy days. "For a moment, I recall those spectacular arcs of time when I was the solitary pinprick of sensation in the whole wide world, the one heroic lawbreaker in our dutiful universe."

And the ha-ha? As students of English gardening will know, that's a man-made landscape feature, a trench dug to conceal a fence in order to preserve the view. The nuns have one on the grounds of their convent, which Howie loves to approach at perilous speeds on his tractor mower. We go right to the edge with him, and even if we're not always laughing, we're glad to be along for the ride.