



Back in the World

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The title of this short story collection derives from a slang expression which, in the lexicon of Vietnam veterans, signified returning to the United States. It turns up in a story called “Soldier’s Joy,” when a veteran remembers thinking that he would have it made back in the world, but now that he is back, he experiences nothing but confusion. All of Wolff’s stories examine the confusion of life in the 1980’s, the brave new world of BMW’s and computers, cocaine and high-tech exercise equipment.

In one story, Russell, a young Silicon Valley whiz kid, wins two cars on a coin toss from an abrasive, washed-up, and slightly older whiz kid, Dave. Russell wants to help Dave, who is clearly on a downhill slide, but figures that Dave would lose anything which he received through charity. In another story, a thirty-year-old woman’s birthday is celebrated by three friends who bring three grams of cocaine to her and then stay around all night to help her consume it. Predictably, the celebration turns into a tearful psychodrama, and the birthday girl is forced to try to cheer everyone up. In a third story, a wealthy yuppie brings his ne’er-do-well younger brother home from a religious commune. It sounds like a variation on the prodigal son story, except that all the younger brother can talk about is how the successful brother, Pete, used to delight in punching him on the stitches when he was recovering from a serious childhood operation. No sense getting all excited about something that happened twenty-five years ago, Pete tells him.

Wolff has a real knack for immediately involving the reader in his characters and plots. His stories all appear to be much larger than they really are. In just a few pages, we seem to be getting enough information to fill a novella. BACK IN THE WORLD is a compulsively readable book that succeeds both as art and entertainment.

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