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## **The Double Life of Alfred Buber**

David Schmahmann's *The Double Life of Alfred Buber* reads like a lost Nabokov novel. Stylistically, the prose is meticulously wrought, the plot deeply complex and psychologically layered. In terms of story, Schmahmann's wayward narrator is nothing short of a latter-day Humbert Humbert, as unreliable in his storytelling as he is driven by unspeakable love for a young prostitute from Bangkok. Where some novels radiate outward, this one spirals in on itself, turn by fascinating turn, exploring the inner life of a man distanced from both himself and reality by his own lies and a soul full of secret, shameful desires.

The novel follows the misadventures of Alfred Buber. To all appearances, Buber is an upstanding (not to mention uptight) pillar of society -- he's on the fast-track to becoming a partner in his law-firm, and the denizens of his suburban town exhort him daily to run for elected office. Indeed, to all appearances his only vice is his bookishness -- that and an apparent fondness for *Star Trek* references. Buber, however, leads a secret life, albeit one that exists largely in his own mind: he's in love with a girl he's barely ever spoken to. And as his apparent "love" spills over into obsession, Buber's grasp on reality slips further and further away.

Throughout the proceedings, author David Schmahmann plays fast and loose with the "truth" as it applies to Buber's life. This, of course, is by design, for even as a narrator, the title character has grown so estranged from reality that he can barely distinguish waking life from his flights of fancy. Yet as Buber's life spirals out of control, Schmahmann manages to hold the whole house of cards together -- no mean feat -- as he moves the narrative to its inevitable conclusion. That the author does so in a satisfying way (no spoilers here... just trust me when I say it works!) speaks to his skills not only as a storyteller but as a prose stylist. The voice of Buber remains loud and clear on every page, even as his imagined and real lives begin to crash down around him.

Ultimately, *The Double Life of Alfred Buber* offers a fascinating examination of what happens when we pretend to be everything we're not. That this is something we all do at one time or another and to one extent or another (and with increasing frequency in the virtual age we're living in) makes it especially relevant. An excellent read and a gripping character study.

*-Review by Marc Schuster*