

RIGHT OF THIRST

By Frank Huyler, (Harper Perennial, 384 pages, \$14.99)

With this book, Frank Huyler creates a fascinating and heartbreaking meditation on healing and motivation. It begins with cardiologist Charles Anderson assisting in his cancer-ridden wife's death. She's too far along to need or even want his comfort, which turns out to be a recurring theme. Distance, physical and emotional, also keeps Charles from explaining to their grief-stricken son what happened in her last days. When returning to his hospital routine proves impossible, Charles seizes on an opportunity to serve in a remote refugee camp in an unnamed Islamic country. As he and his assistant, a German geneticist, and the camp's taciturn military officer await the arrival of the refugees, time begins to stretch, leaving the three to haltingly get to know one another. Huyler's dialogue is remarkable in conveying their attempts, across language barriers, to alternately reveal and conceal their aspirations and baser instincts. As the wait becomes interminable, Charles begins to question his role (as does the German Elise, though she is not as well developed a character). He realizes there's something of the "ugly American" in his hope to be acknowledged for offering his skills or, failing that, his money to help people locked in harsh poverty amid the disruption of war. Even when there's nothing happening in this beautifully austere novel, Huyler provides readers with plenty to ponder.

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