



[« Back to Document View](#)

[Databases selected:](#) The Sun, Baltimore (Special)

[What's new](#)

## Many thanks, many dead, and relentless menace; [FINAL Edition]

Lizzie Skurnick. **The Sun**. Baltimore, Md.: May 1, 2005. pg. 8.F

People: Coake, Christopher  
 Author(s): Lizzie Skurnick  
 Section: ARTS & SOCIETY  
 Publication title: The Sun. Baltimore, Md.: May 1, 2005. pg. 8.F  
 Source type: Newspaper  
 ProQuest document ID: 832010431  
 Text Word Count 632  
 Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=832010431&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=5241&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

### Abstract (Document Summary)

There is more than a hint of Raymond Carver in the unremitting darkness and spare prose of *We're in Trouble*. (The author, like Carver, eschews quotation marks.) Some Alice Munro also can be detected in what could be construed as character-abuse, if mercilessness toward one's own fictional creations were a felony. But [Christopher Coake] is not burdened with Carver's prim, mannered remove, and the harsh landscapes of Munro and Carver are not the characters' downfall. Rather, like a king slowly menaced by an approaching pawn, Coake's characters are locked in by an accumulation of seemingly harmless circumstances, powerless to make the move that would free them. Coake's world is relentlessly dire, but this patient, skillful construction manages to keep the stories from being overwhelming.

### Full Text (632 words)

*(Copyright 2005 @ The Baltimore Sun Company)*

*We're in Trouble*

By Christopher Coake. Harcourt. 306 pages. \$23.

In the sizable acknowledgments section of this debut short-story collection, it is safe to say that only the dentist has been cast out of the warm circle of the author's gratitude. Christopher Coake gives the ubiquitous nod not only to current and former partners, his family, his agent, and his editor, but also to the entire writing faculty of two MFA programs, all of his fellow workshop participants in each, various faculty at undergraduate institutions, a large span of old bosses and coworkers, and -- in an especially well-caffeinated gesture -- the staff at what are presumably favorite watering holes, one Caribou Coffee and a Caffè Apopos.

The author's abundance of thanks is not notable on its face -- in the volatile literary market, an author can be forgiven for wanting to cover all bases the first time out -- but the acknowledgments are significant nonetheless. For it's hard to imagine that the Coake who penned this earnest profusion of good will -- nearly a hundred people's worth, in a rough first count -- could possibly be the same Coake who has authored *We're in Trouble*, surely one of the bleakest short-story collections in recent memory.

In *We're in Trouble*, a dog scabbles unwittingly off a precipice, a young girl is catapulted out of a car -- then off a bridge, a young couple with a child sleeping at home drives head-first into a semi, and an entire family is murdered on Christmas Eve. Another couple almost freezes to death at a rickety lake cabin, a boy is menaced by a pervert in a public restroom, and a mountain climber nearly plummets to his death (his brother is already lost to a crevasse). All told, there are two suicides, three deaths by falling (plus two near ones, both by children), and six deaths by gunshot -- to say nothing of adultery, which passes through the stories like a contagion.

There is more than a hint of Raymond Carver in the unremitting darkness and spare prose of *We're in Trouble*.

(The author, like Carver, eschews quotation marks.) Some Alice Munro also can be detected in what could be construed as character-abuse, if mercilessness toward one's own fictional creations were a felony. But Coake is not burdened with Carver's prim, mannered remove, and the harsh landscapes of Munro and Carver are not the characters' downfall. Rather, like a king slowly menaced by an approaching pawn, Coake's characters are locked in by an accumulation of seemingly harmless circumstances, powerless to make the move that would free them. Coake's world is relentlessly dire, but this patient, skillful construction manages to keep the stories from being overwhelming.

If the author, for the entirety of his career, continued in this vein, would the blanket ruin become tedious? Possibly. And if these stories were merely thrillers designed to provoke what "a teenager feels in front of a campfire, knowing a scary story is coming," as a character in the final story, "All Through the House," observes, they could be as easily dismissed as the fake blood in a slasher movie. But Coake's stories are not the uneven offerings of most debut collections of fiction, and they are not clumsy efforts to horrify. Expertly crafted and edited to the bone, they fill us with fear of a very human kind. As Chekhov famously said, if there is a gun hanging on the wall in the first act, it must fire in the last. If a wife washes a glued-together plate at the start of a Coake story, by the end, we will find out how it breaks.

Lizzie Skurnick is a writer living in Baltimore and editor of the literary blog Old Hag ([www.theoldhag.com](http://www.theoldhag.com)).

Credit: Special to the Sun

Copyright © 2005 ProQuest Information and Learning Company. All rights reserved. [Terms and Conditions](#)

[Text-only interface](#)

Johns Hopkins University Libraries

