

Severance by Robert Olen Butler. Chronicle Books, 2006. 263 pages.



When he is not writing about Vietnam — as he did in his acclaimed collection *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* — Robert Olen Butler often builds his books around a small, clever device.

In *Tabloid Dreams*, Butler's jumping-off point was a few improbable headlines from the supermarket checkout line. *Had a Good Time* was inspired by the author's collection of antique postcards. In *Severance*, his subject is the last moments of people who have lost their heads.

Each of these stories is exactly 240 words long. The premise is that the human head may remain conscious for 90 seconds after decapitation, and a person "in a heightened state of emotion" can speak at 160 words per minute.

There are some problems with these assumptions: for instance, time of consciousness would surely vary, as would speed of speech, and anyway we're talking about the speed of a person's thoughts, aren't we, rather than actual speech? Finally, wouldn't the actual last thoughts of a severed head be rather repetitive (*oh my God, I've been beheaded!*) and if accurately reproduced, too terrible to think about?

All that aside, what we have here is really a collection of 64 little life stories, rendered in stream of consciousness, and on that basis the book succeeds very well. From John the Baptist, to a Mayan ballplayer named Ah Balam, to Nicole Brown Simpson ("I've come to this, to a place of jasmine smell and sea and car exhaust and stucco walls") each victim's experience is rendered with poetic and sensual immediacy.

Butler's wicked sense of humor keeps the book from becoming too dark. (The first narrator is a caveman named Mud, attacked by a sabertooth tiger. The last is Butler himself, beheaded by an elevator after peeking out the door at the wrong moment.) For readers with a morbid streak and taste for poetic prose, this book is a treat.