Advanced Praise for *The Flounder*

In *The Flounder*, John Fulton writes about men caught in riptides, navigating the rough emotional waters of love, marriage and family. A boy faces his father’s terminal illness. A Mormon teenager traveling through post-Soviet Europe fails to lose his virginity. A young husband takes a road trip with his unfaithful wife. Fulton is a writer of great humanity, with an eye for the revelatory moment. These are masterful short stories – closely observed, moving, memorable and profound.

Jennifer Haigh
author of *Mercy Street*

*The Flounder*...feels unified by topic and tone—although the tones are various and the diction supple—as well as in, from time to time, the names of characters. Marital fidelity and infidelity are at issue here, as is the relation between generations and the search for (one might as well call it) authenticity. And the real connective tissue is the talent of its author, whose eye for detail is both telescopic and microscopic. Whether set in rural North America or towns and villages in Europe, John Fulton’s fictions ring true.

Nicholas Delbanco
author of, most recently, *Why Writing Matters*

Faced with apocalypses that are sometimes private and sometimes prophesized, the characters in John Fulton’s *The Flounder* wrestle with faith in many forms. These are stories that illuminate human realities of love and betrayal, life and death using a touch of the miraculous. The result is an elegant collection with a timeless sensi-
bility, as well as the ecstatic capacity to make its readers see their lives anew.

Allegra Hyde
author of The Last Catastrophe

The Flounder is a remarkable book, full of remarkable stories, stories that move quickly through time while simultaneously being firmly rooted in place, stories that manage to be intimate while also having sweep, and grandeur. In this, they remind me of work by Alice Munro and John Cheever, but really, they’re 100% John Fulton: smart, deeply felt, and ingeniously constructed stories of how we go to extraordinary lengths to keep on living our ordinary lives.

Brock Clarke
author of Who Are You, Calvin Bledsoe?
Praise for other books by John Fulton

For *Retribution*

Thank goodness...for the assured, polished, and heartfelt short stories in John Fulton’s first collection...Like the best short stories, Fulton’s say as much between the lines as they do in their tight sentences and tough situations.

—*Chicago Tribune*

John Fulton may be a relative newcomer, but he writes like an old master in this powerful collection of short stories...with penetrating honesty that is worlds away from jukebox sentiment. Most impressive of all is his uncanny insight, reminiscent of J.D. Salinger, into the inner life of children.

—*The Boston Sunday Globe*

Dynamic stories...that cover some tough emotional terrain in a delicately quirky voice that’s just right for revealing life’s dangers, debauches, and dead ends.

—*Elle*

For *More than Enough*

Make no mistake, this is one of the finest debuts in years... It is a treasure of a debut, beautifully written, a human reminder that money is not everything despite the message behind the American Dream.

—*Sunday Tribune Dublin*
Fulton is wincingly sharp on...materialism... [His characters] are drawn with emotional exactitude and profound tenderness.

—Daily Telegraph

Fulton pins his characters painfully and honestly to the page.

—Guardian

Too often books that attempt to talk about the American dream do just that, without engaging the reader. Fulton’s achievement is to write compelling fiction that sucks you into the maelstrom that engulfs the middle-class... A wonderful work...

—The Herald (Glasgow)

This hauntingly sad story [gives]...beautifully written insight into the tough reality behind the American dream, for those without the good fortune to achieve it.

—The Daily Mail

For The Animal Girl

Fulton is a writer of transcendent understanding of human emotions. His decent and likeable characters lead lives that are shadowed by unbearable losses... He has a deep feel for natural setting, and his descriptions recall Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories... Fulton’s collection is another gem...

—The Advocate
Fulton’s fiction is written in a rich, lyrical prose that is both precise and resonant... His fictional characters are rendered with the complexity we afford the people in our own lives.

—The News and Observer

These short stories and novellas are crystallized fiction that manage to tell complete tales in a few pages... Fulton does a careful, detailed job in limning the frustrating emotional life of his characters.

—Library Journal

John Fulton’s fine new collection...is stunningly insightful...at once coolly dispassionate yet steadily compassionate... Fulton’s absolutely a voice to follow.

—The Antioch Review
The Flounder

and Other Stories

JOHN FULTON
For August
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IT WAS true what Mrs. Berry said: No one expected to see an old woman in a muscle car, a convertible Mustang with polished chrome bumpers, a hood scoop, and an engine that ran with a throaty hum that we could feel in that soft place just below our stomachs when she pulled alongside us one day on our walk home from school. Hey there, she said. You want a ride?

Not allowed to with strangers, Kelly said. She and I were friends. In fact, she was the only friend I’d made since my father had gotten sick and my family had had to move into the neighborhood a few months earlier.

The old woman laughed. She wore deep-red lipstick and eye makeup that made the edges of her eyes inky and accented the bones in each socket. But her laugh was loud and full of a warm energy that you wanted to be close to. I’m no stranger. I’m your neighbor, she said. I’m Mrs. Berry.

I’d wondered about the quiet house next to ours and been vaguely aware that old people lived in it. There were a lot of old
people in that town because it never snowed and it was cheap to live in, though not very nice, with abandoned houses on almost every street, their windows boarded up and their front yards turned back into desert.

You should visit me sometime after school for a snack and some lemonade. You two like lemonade?

Sure, I said.

She laughed again, her voice loud and dry. Then I’ll see you soon.

A few days later, just after we got home from school, the old woman called out to us. She was in her driveway, hosing down her car, the water making a splashing sound as it cascaded over the fenders and doors and hit the concrete.

A large walnut tree towered over Mrs. Berry’s front yard and driveway. We approached her through the shade of that tree, which was cool and smelled of wet earth and the clean water that came from the hose. When we got close, she aimed the hose up, squeezed it off with her thumb so that it sent a silvery mist over us. We laughed and lurched back, though the water felt good in the heat. How about some orange pop? she said. I’ve got some inside. And I’ve made some lemon bars.

How fast can that car go? I asked.

Pretty fast, she said, looking at the car, the water still cascading over its hood and down the fenders. It’s got a 289 Windsor V-8—the best engine the Ford Motor Company puts in a car.

She turned off the hose and we followed her inside. In the entryway, Kelly started to take her shoes off, as we both had to do in our houses, but Mrs. Berry waved a hand and said we could keep them on. A cool block of shade touched your skin in that front hall and the dimness of the living room—the curtains were mostly closed—slowed you down. Framed photographs and paintings on the walls depicted oceans, prairies, mountain ranges with birds hovering above them. But the smell was what you noticed most—it was thick, stuffy, not terrible but not pleasant either. It was the
smell of bread and cooked vegetables left too long on the stove and the powerful perfume of air freshener—and something else that was rubbery and medicinal like Band-Aids. And there was a sound that took a moment to notice like the lapping of waves or the rustle of air through trees, as if somewhere nearby there was a forest or lakeshore. But when we scanned the room, we saw that the sound came from a man at the dining room table who sat perfectly still and wore an oxygen mask. He had on loose blue pajamas and was slumped over in a vinyl chair like you’d see in a hospital. A plastic collar held his neck up straight, and his eyes were open but didn’t move or seem to see anything.

This is Mr. Berry, Mrs. Berry said, looking at the man now with a softness in her eyes, though she spoke to him with a booming directness: Michael, these are the neighbor kids, Kelly and Daniel. You’ll be happy to know that I just washed the car.

Her husband, she explained, had had a stroke the year before. He doesn’t move a lot, but he can understand you. You can say hi to him, Mrs. Berry said with an edge of friendly command in her voice that meant we had to say something.

Hey, Kelly said.

Hi, I said.

Mrs. Berry went into the kitchen for the lemon bars and during her brief absence we both looked away from him, though, in fact, I wanted to look closer at his emaciated body and see where the tube of his oxygen nozzle ran and whether his eyes ever moved or his expression changed.

The old woman returned with our orange pops and lemon bars, still warm, covered with powdered sugar that fell down my shirt and made Kelly and Mrs. Berry laugh at my snowy front. Like everything she would give us over the next several months, they were delicious. The orange pop was in glass bottles, which were frosted with the cold from the refrigerator.

Kelly and I ate three lemon bars apiece while Mrs. Berry asked the sort of boring questions that adults asked kids: what grade we
were in and what our favorite subjects were. But when she asked me what my parents did—I always like to know what people do, she said. I think it’s interesting—I bit my lip before explaining that my mother was a teacher’s aide and finishing up her studies to become a real teacher and that my father had worked in the automotive department in the Sears in Redlands but that he was sick now and at home. I felt Kelly stiffen and sit up beside me. She knew I didn’t like to talk about my father, though something about the old woman—her soft voice, her kindness—allowed me to. And just then we could hear him coughing in my parents’ bedroom next door, where he often kept the window open.

He has tumors in his lungs, I said. He’s doing radiation treatments. The doctors say he’s getting better. This last part was a lie. In fact, the doctors hadn’t said anything yet. It would still be some months before we knew if his treatments were working.

Oh, my, Mrs. Berry said, seeming to understand that that was my father we were listening to. The coughing—a deep, wet hacking that sometimes brought up blood—stopped and then started again. We all have our trials, the old woman said. I’m sorry he’s ill, sweetheart.

We were quiet for another moment before the old woman smiled and said, Maybe you two want to come for a drive in Mr. Berry’s Ford Mustang sometime.

Sure, Kelly said.

At one point that afternoon, just as we were finishing our second bottle of orange pop, something changed in the room. It took us a moment to notice the stillness: the watery rasp of the old man’s oxygen had gone silent. He’d stopped breathing. Mrs. Berry was brushing some powdered sugar from her lap when she noticed it, too, and took her husband’s hand. This sometimes happens, she said calmly. His body started trembling then and Mrs. Berry made a comforting sound and whispered close to his face, We’re almost through it, Michael. But it was another minute or two before his body went slack again and the gentle sound
of his oxygen returned. There, Mrs. Berry said, still holding his hand. She smiled at us, her lipstick bright red. It’s okay now. How about another lemon bar?

School let out at noon on the Friday we took our first drive with Mrs. Berry. Since my mother’s school was out, too, she didn’t have to work that afternoon and was in our front lawn, watering the dry flowerbeds, when Kelly and I got home. As we were about to go inside, the old woman stepped out of her house holding a shiny black handbag and wearing dark glasses and a blue kerchief over her red hair. A large woman in hospital scrubs had just pulled up in a station wagon, and Mrs. Berry gave her a sheet of instructions. I’ll be back by four, she told the woman. Then she turned to Kelly and me. Well, hello there, she said, as if surprised to see us, though it was clear that she’d planned everything. We waved at her, after which Mrs. Berry said to my mother, Would the kids like to come on a drive with me? I thought we could stop by the Thrifty Drug for some ice cream cones.

My mother smiled and said she didn’t see why not.

A few minutes later, we were sitting in Mr. Berry’s cream-colored convertible, in which the old woman seemed tiny as she drove down our street and turned the corner as slow as walking. Her smile was large and sly, never mind the clumsy gashes of lipstick on her front teeth. Shall we drag Main? she asked. She revved the engine, the car shaking as she turned out onto Main Street, which wasn’t much: a Thrifty Drug, a few gas stations, a Dell Taco, a post office; a beige municipal building, its front yard all lava rocks, with two poles, one flying the American flag and the other the flag of California; an Assembly of God church and Bethel Baptist, where Kelly and I went; and a National Guard Armory surrounded by a high chain-link fence, razor wire glistening at its top, and behind it rows and columns of armored vehicles, Jeeps and tanks, as far as you could see. They were waiting, we knew, to be sent to Vietnam or to be used against the Russians,
if we ever went to war with them.

When we stopped at the second, and last, light in our town, a truck pulled up beside us and a young man in the driver’s seat looked down at Mrs. Berry and said, Hey there, grandma. He wore a baseball cap backwards and needed a shave.

Mrs. Berry smiled at him, lifted her fist, and thrust out her middle finger, which just made the man laugh.

You kids ready? she asked, and Kelly nodded and Mrs. Berry checked her rearview mirror, then faced the desert, a flat expanse of beiges and browns and reds cut through by the oily line of the road that rose up in front of us until it met the shimmer of blue-white sky in the distance. Hold on, she said. The engine screamed and I felt myself pushed back into the seat as the tires shrieked. Mrs. Berry gripped the wheel and let out a loud, joyful whoop. I looked back at Kelly, her wheat-colored hair whipping in the wind. She was smiling, shaking her head, and holding on to the seat in front of her with both hands. We ripped past a blue Impala and a pickup truck going in the opposite direction, after which it was only us, and it seemed as if we’d tear through the sky and escape what Pastor Lamb at Bethel Baptist called the End Times, when Christ would come again, as the lion and not the lamb, wielding a sword of light to strike down all who had broken His father’s laws.

But the sky didn’t tear away to reveal the heavens, and after some miles Mrs. Berry braked and pulled over and cut the engine. It was quiet and we said nothing for a long time, just looking out into all that space, the brush and flat, chalky dirt making us feel small, a shiny white speck, which was a good feeling to have.

How’d you kids like that? Mrs. Berry asked then.

It was like flying, Kelly said, though, like me, she’d never been on an airplane.

Yes, it was, Mrs. Berry said. And then: You ready for some ice cream? She pulled onto the road and headed back into town,
When we first arrived in that desert town, about three months before I met Mrs. Berry, I didn’t often leave the house. We’d moved because Redlands, where we’d lived as long as I could remember, was too expensive now that my father wasn’t working and my mother was back in school. I didn’t know anybody in our new neighborhood and I had the idea that I should stay around the house to look after my father. In fact, he never asked for anything and didn’t come out of his room much during those months because the treatment he was receiving made him so sick that he slept for most of the day. And even though I missed him—he was a big man, friendly and warm—I didn’t like seeing him up close. His skin was papery and white. He’d become bone thin and lost most of his hair, even his eyebrows, which made his face look naked and strange; and he wore a black winter hat because he was cold, even in the desert heat. Once or twice, when my parents had gone to the hospital, I walked into their room and saw the wicker trash basket full of bloody tissues, the pill bottles, so many I couldn’t count them, on his side table next to his red mug that no one else could use because his saliva was toxic from radiation. Sometimes, when he was quiet for hours, I’d walk up to the closed bedroom door and listen for the sound of him breathing or moving in there. Once, he called out, Steven, is that you? after which I froze and almost said, Yes. Instead, I retreated down the hall, turned the TV on to Gilligan’s Island with the volume so high that I wouldn’t hear him if he called out again.

My mother worked and studied a lot during that time, and when she got home at night, she started worrying, putting our frozen TV dinners into the oven, checking on my father, making sure he’d taken all his medications, after which she and I would sit together at the kitchen table as the dark outside pressed against the windows. We’ll be okay. We’ll be fine, she’d say, without me asking her anything. God is looking after us. And she’d take my saying, Maybe we’ll just go the speed limit now.