

Fiction

Katrina Best, *Bird Eat Bird*, Insomniac Press, 2010

Darcie Friesen Hossack, *Mennonites Don't Dance*, ThistleDown Press, 2010

It is a mystery why short story collections do not typically attract the number of readers that novels do, particularly in Canada, where the word 'literary' in literary fiction is not necessarily pejorative. The craft and precision found in the short story combined with the smaller time commitment required from readers should make the form popular and marketable. According to most publishers, however, this is not the case. The most credible reason I have heard for this is that, while individual short stories can attract readers, the book that a collection of short stories forms is an imperfect item. To my mind, the typical short story collection tends to go one of two ways. The stories either have stylistic or thematic consistency, which results in a feeling of repetition, or the author goes to lengths to vary the stories, which inevitably leaves the reader liking some more than others and feeling that the book is of uneven quality. None of this is meant as a disparagement of the form, but merely as a possible explanation for some of the criticisms readers and, fairly often, reviewers have of collections of short fiction.

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In Katrina Best's debut, *Bird Eat Bird*, the six stories vary in form and content. We hear from a variety of narrators and characters, and the worlds that the stories inhabit are noticeably differentiated. Consistent throughout the stories is a slightly absurdist tone, a hint of a wry narratorial smile. This presence, deftly maintained by Best, goes a long way towards sustaining the energy of many of the stories.

Frenetic and zippy, 'Lunch Hour' is as weird and wonderful a story as you will find. In it, a pelican swallows a pigeon, and the assembled crowd's reaction to this event is puzzling and funny, a razor sharp comment on, I think, our relationship with nature and food.

The pelican took its time swallowing the pigeon, keeping its mottled prey in the sack of its bill for almost half an hour. At first it held its beak ajar. The gap was wide enough for the smaller bird to escape, but the pigeon just sat there, stupefied, head jerking around occasionally. Perhaps it thought itself lucky to have landed in a cool cave and was admiring the grooved interior whilst enjoying a reprieve from the mid-day heat on this, the hottest October day on record.

It was the one chance of escape the pigeon would be given.

'Tall Food,' the collection's fourth story, is narrated by Ellie, a young woman on a second date with Rob, a man who, while awkwardly at-

tempting to humour her, complains that all the food in modern restaurants is piled too ridiculously high. He singles out for mocking the 'blackened red snapper with reduction of balsamic bumbleberry coulis, flame-broiled baby market vegetables and roasted garlic mashed yam with nutmeg shavings.' His comment very nearly paralyzes Ellie, as this is what she had intended to order. When she suggests he order a pizza because of its flatness, he sulks, and gradually we come to realize that Rob is either an idiot or a jerk—possibly both—and that Ellie does not see this at all. In different hands this story could easily descend into a sneering look at two modern fools, but Best treats the characters with such grace and lightness that I was able both to chuckle at and empathize with them as they meander through their inane, ill-fated lunch date.

In 'Red,' however, Best takes a different tone and approach with the story of a young woman who initially seems sane but eventually, clearly is not. The premise and theme of the story are solid, but its unreliable first person narrator does not suit the material as well as the approach Best uses in 'Tall Food.' For me, the final story struck the strongest chord. 'Tripe and Onions,' a conventional third-person narrative, follows Meredith, a young grocery store cashier, as she works her way through the death of her grandmother. Funny, touching, painful and awkward, this story avoids all melodrama and pointless sentimentality with ease and leaves the reader with a sense of both closure and possibility.

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Mennonites Don't Dance is an impeccably crafted debut from Darcie Friesen Hossack. Containing eleven stories similar in theme, the book falls on the opposite end of the spectrum from *Bird Eat Bird*. While I will confess that after a half dozen or so stories I definitely began to feel the wear of repetition—old Mennonites are tough and sometimes real jerks but ultimately they are good people who love their families, whereas young Mennonites yearn to be otherwise but ultimately are not as different from their forbears as they might like—each story is so well written I was able to overlook this feeling. It is a challenge to write stories in which the characters are judging each other while at the same time being judged by the narrator and the readers, without their becoming polarized and hectoring. This is never the case here. The stories look at the characters' flaws and weaknesses and their differing notions of right and wrong without laying blame.

Hossack writes prose that is unadorned and honest, like the Mennonites she features. There are no linguistic pyrotechnics here, but a simple grace in the way she uses language. The climactic scenes of these stories would be very much reduced in impact if florid, poetic

prose weaseled its way in. A clean, direct sentence is often best, and Hossack seems to know exactly when and where to place one.

The opening story, 'Luna,' provides an excellent example of this. From near the end:

Later that night, Jonah woke up and found Hazel on her knees, praying in front of the picture window in their bedroom. He knew without listening to his wife's whispers that she was busy thanking God for something. Worse, though, he knew she was praying for him. He turned away, waiting to be pulled back down into sleep.

This is such an easy paragraph to ruin, and many a writer would succumb to the temptation. Add an image-rich description of what Jonah sees through the picture window. Throw in a couple of abstract adjectives around his wife's whispers, or the quality of sleep he is about to be pulled into. In case the reader cannot quite discern what is going on, put in a sentence that lets us know exactly how Jonah feels about what he is seeing. Mention his dreams if possible. There are many ways to go wrong here, and Hossack avoids them all.

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The title story, 'Mennonites Don't Dance,' is a gem. It has the breadth and scope of a much longer work, but focuses only on those moments that are integral and moves deftly past those that are not. When Lizabeth's brother is killed by the two hoodlums next door, her parents' compassion for and forgiveness of the killer's parents create a rift that slowly increases. Eventually she moves out, marries, and avoids contact with her family until she herself has a daughter. The pressures of being an isolated mother with a husband who is every bit as controlling as any Mennonite father bring her to a beautifully nuanced understanding of the people that are her parents. Their subsequent reconnection and the way the story transmits its current down the generations to Lizabeth's daughter Magda in the subsequent story, 'Dandelion Wine,' is brilliant.

These collections have much to offer readers. They are rewarding, entertaining and engaging. Neither suffers from the plague of so many debut collections, where the author cries out 'look at me! I'm a writer and I can write! Hey! Pay attention!' While differing in approaches and styles, both Hossack and Best are confident, sophisticated and stylistically mature writers who know what they're trying to accomplish and how to go about it.

—Steven Galloway