



Clarion Review

Literary

Backland Graces: Four Novellas

Hal Zina Bennett

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Four Stars (out of Five)

Hal Zina Bennett lives with his wife and pets in a lakeside cabin in rural Northern California. He describes his neighbors as “mostly responsible” citizens living in a hardscrabble community that is “a far cry from Midtown, USA.” This community and its people inspired the stories in *Backland Graces*. They also showed Bennett that even the most dysfunctional individuals possess a hidden “immutable humanity...that rises to the surface in unexpected moments.”

The four novellas are set in and around the community of Deer Lake. Though each story has independent events and characters, a reader can easily imagine that the characters in all of the novellas know each other if not by name, then by reputation. Rocko of “Swimming Lessons” works for Fish and Wildlife. He certainly knows Cal and T.J. of “Congratulations on Your Recent Death” because of their predilection for schemes involving the lake and surrounding woods. Any of the characters might have had a peek at Sarah of “Throwaways” through the pass-through to the kitchen at the Eagle’s Nest Saloon. These implied connections make the book both a portrait of the community and a record of critical moments in the lives of individuals.

Each of the stories contains a spiritual element. As a child, Rocko survives a near drowning in “Swimming Lessons.” His escape from the “slimy muscular thing” that dragged him to the bottom of the lake and his miraculous recovery deeply bind him to Deer Lake. In “Throwaways,” Sarah’s spiritual awakening is stimulated by the music her long absent father creates for her. “The Rapture” is a twist on the story of David and Goliath: Truman, the Christian fundamentalist “David,” overcomes Loman, the nonbelieving “Goliath.” The mystery and cultural conventions surrounding death and dying are explored in “Congratulations on Your Recent Death”: Cal and T.J., grown-up bad boys, reveal their sensitive sides when they kidnap Cal’s father from the veteran’s hospital where he is dying. Later, the eagle soaring over the desert funeral pyre at the end recalls Native American myth. Though spirituality is a strong

element in *Backland Graces*, readers do not need to share the author's beliefs or fear that his purpose is to proselytize.

The emphasis on spirituality reflects Bennett's interest in ancient spiritual traditions. This interest has infused the author's private and professional life, beginning with his own near-death experience as a teenager. Bennett has written more than thirty books, including nonfiction titles on spirituality and creativity. He also conducts seminars on writing and spirituality.

Because Bennett is a skillful writer, the few word errors in the text stand out. For example, in "Congratulations on Your Recent Death," switching between using "Teddy" and "T.J." for the same character is confusing. Nevertheless, Bennett presents four powerful stories in *Backland Graces*. His characters, though somewhat sentimentally drawn, seem true and they challenge readers to look beyond appearances.

Geraldine Richards