Clarion Review

Short Stories

Chicago Tales
Bill VanPatten
Outskirts Press
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Three Stars (out of Five)

A young woman either experiences a psychotic breakdown or actually turns into a bird of prey— it's up to readers to believe or not in Bill Van Patten's opening Kafka-esque tale in this, his first short story collection.

VanPatten, recently serving as Professor of Spanish and Second Language Acquisition and Director of Spanish Basic Language at the University of Illinois at Chicago, writes from a psychiatrist's perspective in "The Whisper of Clouds." He observes, then wonders if perhaps his new patient truly flew off, transformed. The second story "Guadalupe" features another young woman who takes her grandmother to see the image of the Virgin Mary outlined on the expressway overpass. With each folktale style story, the supernatural elements fit in neatly.

All fourteen stories in the collection cling to a Chicago thread that loosely stitches them together. The third, set in 1871, just before the Chicago fire, features an Irish immigrant family whose mother stood accused of theft. It has a satisfying twist when the daughter saves the parent. The story mentions the fire, but in truth, this historic event plays no part in the story.

By the fourth story, "Pandora's Box," topics begin to turn dark. Families become more dysfunctional, the father kicks the mother out of the home when he discovers the secret of her lesbian past. Subsequent stories feature male prostitutes, transvestites, revenge of the death of a gay lover… In "Maxwell Street Blues," the author attempts a bit of Jewish humor, but it falls flat.

“Character Hunt” explores dueling points of view. “High Rise” with a Chaucerian bent, takes readers behind the doors and into the lives of apartment dwellers. VanPatten closes the collection with a tale of a more traditional male/female relationship that may or may not include the Christian prophesied Rapture. It does include a great line of dialogue: “I gave up religion when I stopped eating Rice Krispies.”

VanPatten writes tight tales that start out promising: “The smell of gunpowder hung in the air, sharp and sulfuric as if the devil himself had pulled the trigger.” or “The EMS truck barreled down Orleans Street … the shrill of its siren slicing through the din of city noise like a scalpel splitting soft tissue.” Plots unfold smoothly and move unfalteringly forward. Descriptive phrases jump out with unexpected strength. “Ruby came sauntering down the street with the familiar clickity-clack of her cockroach killing black heels.”

Yet, the stories maintain an aura of writing exercises. Sadly the city mentioned in the title stands only as a backdrop. Chicagoans might take offense at the title, realizing quickly that these tales have little to do with what gives the Midwest metropolis its special flavor: No Chicago swagger, no insider details, only superficial references to historic events or locations. Readers of gay fiction may find some of the stories a lightweight escape; short story lovers may be disappointed.

Dawn Goldsmith