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Crossing Shattuck Bridge

Annette Sanford
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> *In actual fact she had never met the man meant only for her. If he came along, she didn't see him because Hawley Rains had flashed across her life like Halley's Comet and left the sky dark for fifty-one years. 'Now that,' she said, 'is something to cry about.'*

This excerpt from "Bear the Dead Away" shows clearly how Sanford is able to shine throughout this collection of short stories. She creates strong images from simple words and profoundly human characters through her focus on universal themes like love, aging and forgiveness.

Irene, from "Bear the Dead Away," is just one such example of a character with which readers will immediately develop an intimate relationship. She is an old woman, who always held onto her hopes for love, marriage, everything of her girlish childhood fantasies. She realizes at the funeral of her suitor from five decades prior that she never has and never will realize her dreams. "Wretched hope had kept her in port, had siphoned her youth away and left her to wither," as Sanford poetically puts it.

Each of her stories is highlighted by a writing style similar to grandmother's touch - gentle with a coarsely realistic edge. She openly, but not bitterly, approaches the harsh reality of pain, old age, even death in her characters.

In the title story "Crossing Shattuck Bridge," two orphans raised as sisters confront ghosts and guilt on a foggy old bridge. A "backwards" thirty-three-year-old woman outsmarts her supposedly "normal" and self-absorbed brother in "Goose Girl." In "Helens and Roses," a couple at the end of their lives clings to each other.

While many of Sanford's stories revolve around older characters, she also is able to catch the delightful charm of children in several stories, such as "Mr. Moore's Old Car" in which a daughter realizes her mother had a life and love before her father. "?Do you know about love? The falling in kind?'" the ten-year-old girl asks the servant named Bernice, who is described as "Bernice, the cook and the Grand High Matron of the African Sisterhood. Berniece was tall and wore canvas shoes with the toes cut out to make room for her corns." The very questioning girl later cannot figure out what toast could possibly have to do with clanking glasses.

The friendly conversational tone of Crossing Shattuck Bridge brings many smiles to readers. Sad sighs laced with empathy also are common reactions throughout this delightful collection of characters.
MARJORY RAYMER (December 16, 1999)

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