

## Expect Some Delays: Short Stories About Detours in Life

**Carolyn Gaye**

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*Expansive and thoughtful, the short stories of Expect Some Delays capture the graces and ironies of aging.*

Carolyn Gaye's imaginative short story collection *Expect Some Delays* focuses on characters who have crossed the meridian of fifty.

Concerned with the uncharted territory across the divide of middle age, these stories encompass a variety of characters, settings, and time frames. The oldest setting is Dodge City in a period of stage coaches and dance halls; the newest is set in an AI-human future; most are set in contemporary America, in familiar cities and suburbs.

The stories' diverse, compelling situations and characters are their driving force; both sustain interest. Each story's main elements are connected to lesser, supporting ones. In one nuanced story, the potential breaking point of a long marriage is confronted in the quiet suburbs; the couple navigates their situation well, and the story highlights their willingness to stay and sand away at the relationship's rough spots. Elsewhere, a business tycoon is forced to retire, but finds unexpected happiness in helping an ethereal widow maintain an ancient motel court. The overgrown property is described in a way that suggests that it is a Shangri-La, though hidden in the overgrown brush behind a strip mall in southern California.

These stories evoke empathy for their characters, as when a comic actor on the verge of retirement longs to play a serious leading man, but is told by his agent that it would be a ridiculous disaster. The assessment is true, but the message is lightened, and the actor saved from pathos, by the story's notes of the real-life farce going on around them. Such characters think and speak in an individualized manner; their actions often reflect their settings and personalities. Their conversations are natural and convincing, especially when it comes to the book's long-married couples.

The stories move with speed. One begins with an ancient steer loitering on prairie tracks while a passenger steam engine bears down on it; this opening establishes the story's era and human terrain, and it secures interest well. A masterpiece of concision, the entry recreates a woman's entire history in sharp, staccato scenes.

Though dealing with separate situations and characters, the stories' themes reinforce the idea that transitions, even unwanted ones, are part of life, rather than separate and alien destinations to be avoided or denied. Tucked into them are insights and moments of beauty that only come through loss and aging, such as of the couple whose story begins in the fire of love, which seems spent by their middle age, and is rekindled as the pair draws together to present a united front to illness.

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SUSAN WAGGONER (June 2, 2021)

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