

House Parties

Lynn Levin

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In the short stories of Lynn Levin's wry, tragicomic collection *House Parties*, some people struggle; others behave badly.

In "Tell Us About Your Experience," an office worker who's sick of filling out satisfaction surveys decides to rebel. Elsewhere, Henry Harris attends the funeral of a man who shared his same name just to "vamp his own self-esteem" by way of eulogies. In another story, a teenage boy saves his parents' marriage by scapegoating a Russian dissident violinist whom his mother is enamored with.

The book's women are lonely: one is estranged from her daughter and takes up community service, caring for an elderly woman in a retirement home during a pandemic. In a magical realist entry, a Jewish woman fashions a golem out of meatloaf to be her companion. Elsewhere, the fear of being single leads a woman to tolerate dating a pugnacious man. People engage in strange, petty actions too: in "Sendings," a nosy woman "blank mails, not blackmails" her neighbor for snubbing her on the street.

Commanding with their distanced points-of-view, these tales unveil the emotions between the truths people tell themselves and the truths they present to others. In "House Parties," the hypocrisy of a neoliberal, nature-loving planned community is exposed by the wanton killing of a coyote. And in "Evermay Blair," a school vice principal kills a girl in an act of vehicular manslaughter; his anguished efforts at self-redemption are gripping and tragic. In another tale, a woman who inherited her grandmother's French milliner papier-mache head struggles to rid herself of it, but learns that psychic burdens aren't so easily disposed of.

Morality balances on a precipice in the lingering short stories of *House Parties*, which are unflinching in exposing how people sometimes know what's right, but still choose to do otherwise.

ELAINE CHIEW (May / June 2023)

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