FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Short Stories

If a Stranger Approaches You
Laura Kasischke
Sarabande Books
Softcover $15.95 (pp)
978-1-936747-49-8
(Feb 15, 2013)

Between the sprawling expanse of the novel and the more concise scalpel work of poetry lies the potent and often undervalued form of the short story. Known for her many novels and volumes of poetry, Laura Kasischke has released her first collection of stories with the excellent *If a Stranger Approaches You*.

Kasischke has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, multiple Pushcart Prizes, and other awards for her work, which includes eight poetry collections and eight novels. With such experience and accolades, it's no wonder that her writing is full of potent imagery, metaphors, and turns of phrase. In the story "The Foreclosure," the narrator vividly describes the experience of her parents' passing:

"My mother's cancer followed my father's heart attack. There was no inheritance, but there was no debt. It was as if they'd taken care to sweep the floor behind them, moving backward out the door so as to leave not a trace of themselves when they left."

As in many collections, some stories succeed gloriously, while others, particularly some of the shortest stories in the book—"Memorial," "Our Father," and "Joyride"—feel less satisfying, more like vignettes than fully fleshed-out works. Of the most notable stories, the standout is the source of the book's title, "If a Stranger Approaches You about Carrying a Foreign Object with You onto the Plane." Despite the cumbersome title, the story is anything but; it's an affecting meditation on chance, social interaction, and circumstance. Originally published in *Ploughshares*, the story received the Cohen Award for Fiction and was reprinted in *The Pushcart Anthology*; by itself, it's worth the price of admission.

Kasischke's tales are not generally of the O. Henry variety—that is, while we visit with her characters, observing alongside them or through them, their tales often feel like interludes—torn, but telling, chapters from the larger manuscript of each protagonist's life,

rather than stories with final resolutions and firm endings. With many of her offerings, the reader is left with an implicit invitation to imagine what happens next—a modern storytelling conceit that more closely resembles the sometimes subtle shifts of real life but might not be to every reader's taste.

Kasischke's best stories succeed by grounding themselves in concrete, real-world environments—a man attending his young daughter's birthday party, a woman walking the neighborhood who notices a beautiful old house—before her elegant and sometimes ethereal prose detours the reader into the unexpected.

Overall, *If a Stranger Approaches You* is a collection worth reading, and Laura Kasischke is a welcome, if long overdue, addition to the ranks of short story writers. One hopes that she will continue to make the form part of her ongoing literary repertoire.

Peter Dabbene