

Kiss Me, Stranger

Ron Tanner

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Post-apocalyptic fiction, once solely the purview of science fiction and best exemplified by novels such as *Earth Abides*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, and *Alas, Babylon*, began moving toward mainstream fiction with the publication in 1980 of Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. Cormac McCarthy continued mainstream use of the setting in *The Road*, as did Margaret Atwood in *Oryx and Crake*. Award-winning writer Ron Tanner ventures into this field with a slim novel that shimmers with imagery both verbal and visual. Tanner's illustrations are apt comments on runaway consumerism, the foibles of warfare, and totalitarian government in the guise of the local civil servants.

During an unnamed country's civil war, one family struggles to keep itself together while two of its men are fighting on opposing sides. Penelope and Marcel love each other and their fourteen children, but times are very tough: they and their neighbors must scavenge for metal to "contribute" to the Presidential Militia for arms and other items in the war effort. The seemingly endless conflict has nearly stripped the surrounding land bare of trees and edible plants, so scavenging for salable or trade-worthy items is vital to staying alive. The Revolutionary Militia's leaders seek to overthrow the President and his cabinet and install themselves in their places. The local Presidential Militia representative, Alexander—whom Penelope's children gleefully call "the Metal Man" and whom Penelope calls Hermes because that's the name on his shirt—takes his job a little too seriously. During a stop at her house to pick up the required metals that Penelope and her children have scavenged, Alexander insists that she hasn't handed over enough metal scrap; he's got his eye on her oven racks. Unable to stomach his smarmy attitude, she slaps him, gets arrested, and escapes to run off with her children to a nearby landfill, frightened that Alexander will find and arrest her again.

The landfill provides the most meager of livelihoods for all who live there. Penelope and her children must do the best they can in their new "home." Eventually the war winds down, and Penelope waits in hope that her husband and eldest son will return safe and whole from their wartime experiences. Life is uncertain for all of her family; the only sure thing for them is change, whether they want it or not.

Throughout *Kiss Me, Stranger* the hardships of life are seen through the veil of familial love and loyalty. Penelope and her children have no TV or videogames or cars or new toys, so they tell stories and sing songs to each other for entertainment. This "reversion" to earlier pastimes softens the bleak existence the characters endure in this story. Tanner uses satire and humor in balanced amounts to convey the irritating nature of bureaucracies as well as the humanity of even the most avoided government official.

Brightly bleak and utterly human, *Kiss Me, Stranger*

is a sort of picture book for adults. It brings home how much our modern world takes for granted, and how some of us might cope when all that "stuff" is taken away.

J. G. STINSON (March / April 2011)

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