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FOREWORD REVIEW ♥♥♥♥♥ GENERAL FICTION

Last Call

K.L. Cook
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It can be an odd thing when reading fiction to encounter a likable story about unlikable people, and more peculiar still to come across a collection that consists almost entirely of such pieces. This cycle of twelve interrelated stories concerning several generations of a west Texas family is just that sort of curiosity.

It isn't that the Tates are marginal or undistinguished, or merely so. In fact, you begin to root for the marginal and undistinguished among them, since they at least have an appeal that derives from redemptive qualities utterly lacking in most other members of the family.

Take Laura, for example. The middle child of five Tate siblings and a prominent character throughout the book, she has been married four times, twice to the same man, is alcoholic, and repeatedly abused by her spouses and sexual partners. Through her behavior, she fosters such severe resentment in her own two children that they will carry lifelong wounding. Laura, though, has an introspective quality that a reader cannot help but admire, and a kind of unaccountable resoluteness that rings true for anyone who has ever habitually repeated the same mistakes because of deeply rooted flaws of character.

The author teaches creative writing and literature at Prescott College in Arizona. His stories have been published in literary journals and magazines, including *American Short Fiction*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Harvard Review*, and he is the recipient of the Santa Fe Writers Project Grand Prize for their Literary Arts Series, among other honors.

In these stories, betrayal is a prominent theme, and Cook understands well that the distinction between faithlessness and opportunism is often a matter of pure chance. In the books title story, Travis, Laura's seventeen-year-old nephew, turns down an invitation to play poker with a couple of bartenders he works with. His older sister, Julie, has been in dangerous labor all day, and he reasons: "I'd learned from my father that you shouldn't press your luck. If you felt it coming on—and I could always feel it like a cool space around me, a clear-eyed alertness—you should channel it into one thing and one thing only. I wanted to give the luck to Julie, if that was possible." Its sufficient to say that the hope Travis holds out is betrayed by circumstance, and yet, in a sense, his luck doesn't let him down. The end result of good fortune ultimately diminishes the tenuous bonds of his family even further.

In a spare, unornamented prose, Cook writes about spare, unornamented people. These are stories about boozers, petty gamblers, con artists, and perpetual victims set in honky-tonks, dirt farms, and trailer parks, a world where a good night means making it home with somebody next to you—perhaps even your own spouse—without rolling the car on its roof along the way.

RALPH CULVER (August 18, 2009)

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