



On a Darkling Plain: Stories of the Great Depression

Betty Jean Tucker

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Young characters personify a tumultuous era, giving it meaning to those for whom the Great Depression feels like ancient history.

These ten stories, composed over the course of Betty Jean Tucker's adult life, circle the era of the author's early childhood during the Great Depression. It is unspoken but clear that this time period left an indelible mark on the author, just as it left a lasting mark on the nation. This unifying force in the stories roots *On a Darkling Plain: Stories of the Great Depression* and gives readers the common ground of a familiar topic to stand on.

The characters, many of whom are children, give voice to the harsh daily realities of the Great Depression that dig deeper than financial disaster, such as the brother and sister in "The Dog That Wasn't a Dog" who "woke up every morning and She was gone," and who fight for independence and self-sufficiency in the face of their childhood vulnerability. The characterization is simple and familiar, but the plot brings the characters into fully drawn beauty. They personify the experience of that tumultuous time in history, enlightening the growing masses for whom the era feels like ancient history. Even stories set well after that time focus on it in retrospect, such as in "Bless Her Heart," where a granddaughter interviews her aging grandmother about the Depression.

The title, a reference to Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach," captures the tone of literary foreboding that fills the book. The narratives, while dim, seem to offer hope—to be realistic while aching for optimism. The stories have a strong sense of meaning and theme, ranging from subtle to overt; for example, "The Taboo Factor" begins, "Morality gets a little muddled sometimes."

On a Darkling Plain is a good fit for those who enjoy literary, historical stories—those who, like the young adult character in "Bless Her Heart," seek to see through their ancestors' eyes. Readers will get what they wish for and more—a deep, shadowy understanding of a hellish time.

MELISSA WUSKE (Fall 2014)

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