

One Dog Happy

Molly McNett

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If stories were songs, then *One Dog Happy* would surely be the most hummable of short fiction. Not just because the title story uses music—a minister croons “Make Someone Happy” to an incontinent beagle saved from the pound (and, in due course, brought back from the dead)—but also because the stories in *One Dog Happy* have a way of sticking in your head afterwards like a tune on the radio.

Not every one is a light-hearted jingle, although even the darkest have a delicious mix of tender and sassy, woeful and cheerful, humorous and horrific that together make this an engaging collection. All have female narrators, and most are told from the point of view of a young girl spying on, if not snooping into, the private lives of the adults in the family. Sometimes it’s a divorced dad or a whacked-out mom, but it could also be grandma with her “creepy little eyes that were almost too blue,” or a “cradle robber” cousin, or a “mail order” bride (and stepmother) to be. Like cranky old Mr. Bob, who’s relied on to take care of the minister’s house (but not his dog) while the family is away, the reader will be drawn to “their quagmire, somehow, as he might be compelled to worry at a stubborn knot.”

Offbeat yet familiar, these stories revolve around themes of good and bad, happy and sad, honest and deceitful. The characters want to be good, yet get a thrill out of being bad. In “Helping,” Ruthie graduates from college and spends “the summer getting a tan, memorizing scripture, and working on a résumé,” hoping to do something meaningful, but her first job, basically babysitting a paraplegic deaf girl, makes her mean and angry in the face of such helplessness. In “Wishbone,” a man saves two ponies with pink eye from the slaughterhouse to please his daughters and or impress his ex-wife, only to find out they believe he’s perverted.

All the stories feature animals, and many take place on farms. In “Bactine,” it isn’t until a girl helps her father with farm chores that she makes the connection between a downed cow “mounted too hard” and her mother’s hopeless depression, and resolves to be less bratty and self-absorbed.

McNett is the winner of the Short Fiction Award from Iowa Press. Several of her stories have appeared in literary reviews, but two of the strongest stories here (including “One Dog Happy” and “Ozzie the Burro”) are original.

If a dog can make one person happy and vice versa, then an author of a fine collection of short fiction like this can expect to make many readers happy.

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