ForeWord Reviews

SHORT STORIES

Portraits of a Few of the People I've Made Cry
Christine Sneed
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Self-assessments as frank and all-encompassing as "…she knows herself to be a woman afraid of engagement, of exposure, of experience, of change, of strangers, of obsolescence and loneliness" are seldom expressed during everyday encounters, but in *Portraits of a Few of the People I've Made Cry*, such reflection is natural among women on the brink of reaffirming or discovering their limitations at work, in friendships, and in romantic liaisons.

Winner of the 2009 Grace Paley Prize in Short Fiction, Sneed's debut features ten accomplished stories—one of which is anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories 2008*, and another which placed second in *Glimmer Train's* Summer 2008 short fiction contest. These stories detail the tensions born of her characters' insecurities; some characters doubt their lovers' intentions, while others question the choices that lead to their present circumstances.

Protagonists include, among others, a recent high school graduate who desires to leave her hometown only to acknowledge that she might never escape its boundaries; a woman in her mid-fifties whose attempt to shield her age from her lover results in the exposure of unfounded fears; the granddaughter of a renowned artist who has yet to gain confidence in her own abilities; a designer who must confront her acceptance of a mysterious benefactor's patronage in exchange for her sexual availability; a professor dismayed by her reaction to a celebrity's enrollment; and a screenwriter who learns she is the object of a former classmate's jealousies.

Sneed wisely refrains from depicting her characters as fragile naïfs or detached, cosmopolitan doyennes. Regardless of their ages, the women emerge as aptly drawn, complex figures who often know they have room to grow when it comes to understanding the heart's nuances, and who can accept momentary setbacks as a means for strengthening their resolve.

Though two stories present marked departures from the others–one in which a woman recalls an aggressive interviewer, and the other a more distanced exploration of a hotline in a walled city–the collection is nonetheless threaded by rhythmic prose as well as the occasional, priceless hyperbole. Readers especially attuned to the author's strong timing will appreciate feats such as "By the Way" and "Alex Price, Inc." This is a collection to relish, not only for the

care that is evident in each turn of phrase, but for its ability to turn weaknesses into thoughtful, sometimes melancholy explorations of contemporary adulthood.

Karen Rigby