

Quantum Convention

Eric Schlich

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Ready for the next new thing in fiction? You'll find it in *Quantum Convention*, wherein eight richly imagined, humanity-affirming tales lay new turf for short stories. The settings embrace everything from a world in which an eons-old Merlin lives next door to an off-kilter present where dream control is the latest trademarked trend. Where other stories might make such quirky stage sets the star, characters have the upper hand here, and that's where the delight lies.

No matter their bizarre circumstances, these characters remain intensely human, with deep and often humorous stores of self-irony. A man who seeks out his selves at an alt-universe meet-up doesn't care how the physics works—he just wants to measure himself against his others. In “Journal of a Cyclops,” thirteen-year-old Owen is less bothered by having an eye in the middle of his forehead than he is by his severely overprotective parents.

Adult characters are well defined, but even better are the children, who reflect all the soon-to-vanish innocence, poignant doubts, and lingering wounds of childhood. Though their circumstances range from a surreal world in which orphans are exploited as professional mourners to an ordinary world where religious fanatics terrify them with stories of being left behind during the second coming, their suffering is the same.

Not every detail is nailed down. Some endings are ambiguous, leaving delicious spaces for the reader to slither through. Others gain strength by what's left out. “Not Nobody, Not Nohow” alternates Margaret Hamilton's experience playing the green-faced witch in *The Wizard of Oz* with the dawning awareness of a young boy that his infatuation with cross-dressing as Dorothy says something deeper and less acceptable about himself. Here, the pivotal scene is led up to rather than described, making the imagined event all the more piercing.

Eric Schlich's *Quantum Convention* is that rare collection that delights, expands horizons, and leaves a mark.

SUSAN WAGGONER (November/December 2018)

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