Clarion Review

Short Stories

Stories
Kevin Raney
AuthorHouse
978-1-4772-1027-7
Two Stars (out of Five)

Billed as a book of short stories, the debut of author Kevin Raney is more accurately described as a slightly fictionalized autobiography. Raney's gender remains unclear to readers because although the author goes by the traditionally masculine name of Kevin, the author self-identifies on the back of the book with, "My name is Kevin (Miss)." Regardless of gender, Raney does not create fictional short stories but instead narrates autobiographical incidents.

It is unfortunate that the title is misleading because Raney's actual life provides much interest to readers. For the audience interested in careers in forestry or firefighting, Raney writes detailed, fascinating accounts about what it was like to be in these fields out West in the 1980s. Moreover, those who have experience with mental illness will relate to the author's poignant descriptions of diagnosis, the cost and benefits of medication, and the struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy while having a mental disorder. Baby boomers will appreciate the author's firsthand account of caring for an aging parent while making sure one's own needs are also met.

Although many audiences will enjoy Raney's collection, several structural choices and narrative decisions make the story difficult to follow. The author narrates the text using the first-person point of view of a woman named Jane. And although this character is a woman in the male-dominated profession of firefighting, there is disappointingly little information about how this fact affects the narrator.

Readers are not introduced to important members of Jane's family until later in the book, which denies the audience a sense of the character's familial environment. Similarly, Jane's colleagues and supervisors are referred to by their job titles instead of their names, a device which also distances the reader from other key players in Jane's life. Another concern is that Raney reports events in summary paragraphs that tend to dampen the immediacy of significant moments and pull readers further away from the narrative. In addition, a lack of dialogue

renders the incidents closer to the style of newspaper reporting than of incidents in someone's life.

Though the story generally follows a chronological trajectory, little effort is made to link the chapters together so that they flow smoothly. On a textual level, the author inserts an intrusive asterisk (star) by words that merit further definition but does not define these terms until the end of each chapter. The choice to define the common word "deciduous" yet leave some terms specific to firefighting undefined is confusing because the writing does not often contain enough context clues to decipher the meaning of unfamiliar words. Such stylistic quirks are unfortunate because readers could learn many universal lessons from Raney's experiences if they were presented in a more lucid and intriguing manner.

Jill Allen