

The Bookseller and Other Stories

Gunilla Caulfield

BookSurge

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Swedish-born author, Gunilla Caulfield, has written a strong debut short-story collection that draws on her Scandinavian heritage. *The Bookseller and Other Stories* contains thirteen stories, most of which focus on the nuances of relationships within contemporary families, but some read like European folk tales or medieval sagas.

Caulfield's writing style is not fancy; there are no hundred dollar words sprinkled throughout her prose. Rather, her characters speak plainly and are described in straightforward terms, a style which has the effect of making her characters seem timeless and universal. The subject of "Mrs. Monet's Garden" could be an aging flower gardener in almost any era or location, and the author's ability to create reader empathy is apparent here and throughout the rest of the collection.

"The Silver Button" is a standout in this collection. Therein, the author describes the journeys of the small adornment as it is tucked into or sewn on the uniforms of a line of soldiers throughout European military history. Caulfield subtly changes tone and builds to an intense ending in this well-crafted fantasy. It is a gem that aspiring writers may want to reread and study for its dramatic effect.

Caulfield often uses ironic twist at the end of her stories; a technique which succeeds in most cases. Reminiscent of the best work of O. Henry, there are dramatic changes in fortune that turn on a single detail. Unfortunately, the title story, which otherwise creates a jewel-box setting full of delicate, damaged characters with strong back stories, disintegrates at the end with unconvincing dialogue and an inelegant denouement. However, the tale also includes many wonderfully descriptive scenes of bookstore poetry readings and artist gallery receptions, so as to make the rushed ending almost unnecessary.

Overall, this short story collection will be enjoyed by readers who enjoy literary travels to a variety of realms. Caulfield introduces us to beachcombers in Sweden, homeless New Yorkers, flamenco teachers, Midwestern waitresses, Indian mystics, and scheming, insanely proud Nordic queens. A few typos and misused words (like "wood" for "would") detract from the polish of this collection, but Caulfield's skill in creating so many different settings and intriguing characters makes this a great addition to any public or private library.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (December 3, 2010)

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