

The Furniture Makers: And Other Tales Lacking Abject Misery

Veronica Dunbar

Outskirts Press (May 2008)

Softcover \$10.95 (188pp)

978-1-4327-2537-2

The subtitle of Veronica Dunbar's debut implies that most modern fiction concentrates on her dislike of "abject misery." In this novella and the three accompanying short stories the stress is on the heartwarming. Despite conflicts and mild crises the characters triumph over their own faults—and those of others—as well as the stumbling blocks of accidents, war, society, and even a supernatural visitor.

"The Furniture Makers" the novella which opens the book is focused on a woman Laurance Olivet who is competent at business (she inherited and now manages her father's successful bookbinding business), self-assured within her self-imposed constraints, intelligent, and generally well pleased with her life. Unmarried, she sees no need for commitment to a man, though she gets along well with her few male friends and acquaintances.

An accident on a winter vacation lands Laurance in the care of an island family: the grandfather; an adopted orphan woman Nina; and a young orphan Tom, who are also sturdy and self-sufficient. Laurance's life is drastically changed by this experience and she changes theirs. The story is competently written in an old-fashioned way and the characters gain some of our sympathies. The upshot of the slightly plotted tale is that Laurance, Nina, and Tom each make choices that overturn their present satisfactions and lead them to even more happiness. Grandfather, in his wisdom and humor, facilitates these changes.

The other three short stories "A Mood Apart," "Helen," and "Vivian" take up the same themes; within family settings in circumstances of grief, war, and the appearance of a ghost, "abject misery" is avoided and satisfying resolutions gained.

Unfortunately, Dunbar writes with little energy or surprise. She has also fallen back on a cliché of fiction; the after-effects of the title novella and the story "Helen" are explicated through letters: one from Nina to Laurence, the other written by young Jamie who becomes a war reporter.

The book suffers from such editing flaws as the lack of a table of contents, numerous spelling errors, much haphazard spacing within and between sentences, a reliance on Anglicisms, and misleading jacket copy which claims that Dunbar's stories "all take place in fictionalized settings of the Great Lakes" when in fact none of them seem to certainly not overtly. (Most references are to "the sea" or "seaside.") This will disappoint Midwestern readers who may have picked up the book to find their own locales used and described.

The book is recommended for only the largest collections or to those readers who crave a sentimental "good read."

JAMES DENBOER (August 15, 2008)

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