



The Museum of Possibilities

Barbara Sibbald

Porcupine's Quill (Mar 15, 2017)

Softcover \$19.95 (182pp)

978-0-88984-400-1

This collection is a brilliant example of the versatility and vast potential of the short story form.

Barbara Sibbald's probing, sympathetic, and quietly graceful short stories are collected in *The Museum of Possibilities*.

The Ottawa-based Sibbald has been an editor, a journalist, and the author of novels, and the stories gathered in *The Museum of Possibilities* are representative of both her writing skills and her experience, spanning more than two decades of her work.

Divided thematically into three parts, the book begins with the title story, in which a man visiting a hoarder gains glimpses of what might have been in his own life. The collection gains steam, as the stories that follow fully embrace Sibbald's greatest strength—intimately inhabiting her characters.

The complicated friendship, combined with elements of unacknowledged love, depicted in "Places We Cannot Go" is utterly convincing and affecting. Sibbald is also inventive, as demonstrated in the standout "Things We Hold Dear," which shows the thoughts of a character in a story intercut with those of the reader of that story. The two women are revealed as parallels, as the fictional reader comments on the character:

She believes she's found solace in others. But now that she understands the narrowness of the contract, can she continue? It is a question I settled for myself long ago, propelled by Phillip, of course, but still... We have to make our peace or be consumed by the quest.

Part two of the book, called "Dispatches from Madawan," shows off Sibbald's wit with several sly and often satirical three- or four-page glimpses into the lives of denizens of Madawan, Ontario. But Sibbald always manages a kind of elegant subtlety, and she never sacrifices a deeper point on the altar of humor.

Part three marks another highlight: the five stories that profile a single character, Wanda, beginning at age eight and continuing through her adult life. Here, Sibbald allows a view of family dysfunction through the eyes of a child, a preteen, and later, an adult, in convincing voice each time. The saga culminates in the story "The Normal Blur of Myopia," in which an eye degeneration forces Wanda to truly see the nature of her own personal life.

Sibbald has a deft and delicate touch in bringing her characters to life—small details regularly reveal larger truths. *The Museum of Possibilities* stands not just as an excellent introduction to Sibbald's writing or a handsome and convenient collection of some of her best work in fiction—it's also a brilliant example of the versatility and vast potential of the short story form.

PETER DABBENE (June 6, 2017)

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