FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

General

The Record Player: and Other Stories
Winifred Moranville
New Rivers Press
978-0-89823-198-4
(January 31, 2000)

"The soft glow of sentiment," a poet once remarked "always makes me want to spit up." Moranville's stories test the borders of sentiment, and flirt constantly with nostalgia. Fortunately, the lyricism of these understated tales tempers and complicates whatever simple yearning for the past tempts their characters. Interweaving seven substantial stories with as many briefer sketches, this collection offers a subtly but satisfyingly complex vision of life in the upper Midwest.

The struggle to accommodate the remembered past to an uncertain present, particularly for people whose rural and small town conditions of life have changed irrevocably, drives many of these stories. In the first, "Barn Shadow Dance," members of a farm family return from their various urban lives for their centenarian grandmother's funeral. Much has changed; the buildings are empty and disused, the farm in the hands of strangers. Yet their mother refuses her children's nostalgia: "I still love the view out there, even if the land isn't ours anymore." The funny and touching "The Health Food Junkie Juice and Sandwich Bar" features a narrator who waits tables at that leafy-plants-in-the-windows establishment until it collapses for lack of business. Most notable is her empathy not only for the bearded owner, but for her own father, whose lunch counter is bought out by a developer, and the whole range of people who, in her words, "had lost everything just trying to stand still while the rest of us moved unsteadily on."

Empathy is perhaps the dominant note of these stories; even unsympathetic characters generally emerge as human and forgivable, eventually. This is not the most intense or dramatic book of stories of the year. The style is plain, nearly transparent, and the longer speeches can seem a little stiff. There are, however, many moments of gentle insight and quiet rigor, as complicated human beings show both weakness and unpredictable strength in the face of change.

Jeff Gundy