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Short Stories

The Story until Now: A Great Big Book of Stories
Kit Reed
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If a writer is talented (and lucky) enough in her publishing career, there will come a time when a compilation of short stories is published. Writers with long careers (twenty or more years of steady publication) may be able to publish such collections more than once. With *The Story Until Now: A Great Big Book of Stories*, Kit Reed is publishing her tenth short fiction collection. That should clue readers in to the strength of her work as well as its longevity.

Reed began her writing career as a newspaper reporter in the late 1950s. “Newsrooms used to be terrific places to learn to write,” Reed noted in an interview published in the April 2010 edition of Locus magazine. “You have to be quick and precise and it beats the temperament right out of you.” Luckily for readers, this early training didn’t stifle her ability to comment on contemporary issues with a razor-sharp wit, nor her openness toward scaling genre fences.

In 1974, Reed became an adjunct professor at Wesleyan University, where she also ran writing workshops. She’s now the Wesleyan University Resident Writer. Reed has published short fiction and novels (eighteen so far) since the late 1950s, in magazines ranging from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* to *The New Yorker*. She calls herself “transgenred” because she moves between mainstream fiction and science fiction/fantasy/horror and mysteries with apparent ease. Reed makes it look easy because she’s meticulous and unafraid to go where a story takes her.

The Story Until Now is an excellent compilation of Reed’s career, including works from each of the five decades in which she’s been published. The surprising thing about this fact is that, regardless of the period, none of these stories read as dated. “The Weremother” (1979) is just as fresh and brilliantly written as “Perpetua” (2004). From the just-this-side-of-screaming regularity and politeness of the women in “Pilots of the Purple Twilight” to the humorous yet quite dark ending of “Winter” and on to the perversely enjoyable “The Zombie Prince,” Reed’s

keen insights into the human condition never lose their focus.

Reed demonstrates her ability here to write fiction that reflects its time, whether it's mainstream or not. "Songs of War" (1974) both satirizes and mourns the women's liberation movement. "On the Penal Colony" (1988) is, by turns, cynical and hopeful, a story of a struggle for freedom set in a most unexpected place. She's also trained an ear to what's happening outside academia and uses that information in her fiction as literary touchstones. "Sisohpromatem" stands a Kafka classic on its head and makes it work. Reed wraps more than one romance inside a high school overtaken by its students in "High School High." One of the most insightful yet simple lines comes from the latter work: "In the best stories about high school, it all comes down at the prom." Perhaps that comment isn't a reference to Stephen King's *Carrie*, but observant readers will note and enjoy the link all the same.

Over all her work in this collection, there's a veil of wisdom and common sense laced with dreams and nightmares, regardless of the decade in which a story was published. Reed takes the pulse of the times with each of these stories, and while satire is her primary method of storytelling, it's certainly not the only one she uses. Just as a painter must take care with how each color is laid down, must make the "right" choice of colors to use on a well-constructed canvas, so, too, must the writer who successfully moves from one genre to another and then back again. The flow of Reed's prose is never interrupted from one story to the next and delineates her writing voice clearly and definitely.

It's very rare that one can say there's nothing bad or mediocre about a story collection. *The Story Until Now* is one such rarity, full of literary gems from beginning to end. Reed deserves far more recognition than she's received so far, and this collection proves it.

J. G. Stinson