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Clarion Review

Short Stories

The Woodpecker Menace: Stories from an Accidentally Unseparated Island

Ted Olinger
Tweed Meyer, illustrator
Plicata Press
978-0-9848400-3-8
Four Stars (out of Five)

Quirky, tightly crafted stories celebrate the profound beauty of simple moments.

Wisdom and beauty sometimes hide in unexpected places, and little things can be profound. Author Ted Olinger presents a collection of short stories that calls on readers to open their eyes to the lessons all around, whether in things as life-changing as the loss of a parent or as mundane as a woodpecker's drumming.

Olinger crafts tales that explore how the seemingly simple moments and experiences of life form who we are and may impact us more, or at least as much, as life's grander events. The author also looks at what we can learn by quietly observing and listening to those who live so simply and are so true to themselves that they defy society's conventions. Along the way, he celebrates the beauty and uniqueness of a solitary group of people who know the power of acceptance and community.

This collection of often-humorous short stories relates the experiences of one man with a young family living on the rural Key Peninsula in the South Puget Sound. Readers follow along as he watches his son begin T-ball, a moment he knows may define the boy's life; meets his anarchist neighbor, who writes anti-government poetry that he nails to trees; and sails through a storm in an attempt to fight the lure of alcohol. The man faces his aging mother's slow decline, works through marital issues, and wrestles with a few demons of his own. Yet the more everyday moments, such as battling a woodpecker that keeps his family awake, seem to impact him almost just as much.

The book covers a short period of the man's life, and each vignette serves as a close-up snapshot that, only when placed with the others, produces a larger picture. The stories are simple

yet profound in the meaning they unveil. They whisk the reader to another place and leave him or her pondering the author's message. It's a message that must be dug for like treasure, and one that might be different for everyone.

Olinger writes tight, page-turning prose that has the satisfying feel of a slow read. He creates first-person narrative so believable it seems like biography. He builds characters that are quirky, full, and vibrant in just a few short words. The funny and thought-provoking stories may leave readers wanting more.

Though the stories form a loosely cohesive whole, some readers might prefer a more overt connection and message. And sadly, the sketches by artist Tweed Meyer seem to have lost some of their sharpness and power when printed in the book. That said, this collection proves difficult to put down and will be enjoyed by anyone who appreciates a well-crafted, engaging read that is somehow both light and deep.

Diane Gardner