ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

SHORT STORIES

There Is a Season
Janet Killeen
AuthorHouseUK
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Five Stars (out of Five)

Killeen's persistent lyricism deepens the prose-poetic quality of her brief, quiet stories.

There Is a Season is an exquisite collection of short stories that reflect on human longing and the power of the familiar. Janet Killeen, a retired literature scholar, delivers rich explorations of English life, many of them covering tough subjects—war, infidelity, abuse—with great sympathy.

In the opening tale, a scullery maid's grandchild recalls both the painful realities of his father's paternity and the unlikely graces that followed from it. "Spoiled by Seawater" and "A Gentle Ghost" explore the high costs of war, both for those who fight them and the generations left to recover from them. Against the stolidness of literary tropes stands "Adjusting Her Ideas," a story which gives voice to Mary, the least highlighted sister in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, illuminating her own passions and hungers.

Elements of the magical and mystical are among the collection's recurrent themes. In "Spots of Time," spirits serve a guiding function, and the lengthy, poignant "The Journeying Boy" covers the bone-deep pull of kinship. Killeen repeatedly shines a light on the quiet evidence of abuse. In this vein, "The Seals" is a triumphant tribute to the brave determination of maternal love.

In Killeen's collection, all lives are significant, and all human beings are equipped to counter apathy. As Daniel, the protagonist of "Convergence," lies in bed recovering from a violent attack, he can recall only his attacker's eyes, which were filled with apparent regret: "He must be salvageable. … What other meaning can I make of this?" The sentiment can be easily applied to many characters throughout *There Is a Season* who also face formidable trials but are never regarded as lost.

These stories, many of them brief, have a prose-poetic quality that is deepened by Killeen's persistent lyricism. With skill that recalls Virginia Woolf and Jeanette Winterson,

Killeen teases out the hidden depths of characters whose contemporaries dismiss them as common. The affection-starved heroine of “Ex-Pat” is enraptured by the sensuality of the world around her: “She touched the tassels of the grape hyacinth, the stars of salsify and asphodel, the gloss of anemones,” and “In those moments she breathed completely.”

In “The Journeying Boy,” the collection’s longest story, which includes many of Killeen’s most powerful themes, the hero asks, “Have you ever felt as though you have someone walking alongside of you all the time, … as though you lived in two worlds at once … and the one … we touch and see is less real, less powerful than the imagery one?”

The characters in Killeen’s collection find salvation when they dare to answer “yes” to such questions. Through their glorious audacity, the author offers a sense that the world is richer when one strives to make the mysterious instead familiar, and that life becomes more gratifying when one pursues genuine kinship with others. *There Is a Season* is a magnetic, emotive offering from a profoundly gifted new voice in English literature.

Michelle Anne Schingler