



Urban Disturbances

Bruce McDougall

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Inventive scenarios make the short stories collected in Urban Disturbances disturbing, disarming, and worthwhile.

Bruce McDougall probes the undersides of city and suburban life in his short story collection *Urban Disturbances*.

These stories showcase people dealing with difficulties both self-inflicted and imposed. In "A Walk with God," Ali, a sympathetic immigrant has a chihuahua named God. Ali's efforts to find solid financial and personal footing in Toronto are grounded in issues around low-wage work and racial discrimination, described in a way that embraces humorous wordplay and elements of the absurd. When God goes missing, and Ali's girlfriend Penny advises him to get another dog, he tells her "There's only one God," and she responds, "That's what my uncle says." The epigram that precedes the tale informs and sets the tone for the story, but only reveals its complete meaning once Ali's final fate has been revealed.

This balance of dark and light, a literary chiaroscuro, inhabits the entire book, which sometimes edges closer to the seedy and salacious, as with tales of a pedophile haunted by his actions, or a drug dealer on probation. Justice arrives in ways that are explicit and implied; on occasion, it comes via twists.

In the book's sixteen stories, memorable characters are less common than memorable and imaginative premises, plots, and resolutions, though. This is perhaps best exemplified in "The Price Is Right," in which a father is put up for auction on a game show. The story wastes no time delving into issues of emotional needs and parental responsibilities with charming bleak humor. But its lead, Jack, blends with the Jack of "One for the Money," a journalist who is struck by harsh observations about the power of the dollar. Others also have interchangeable names: Carl Vigneault, the once hockey hopeful in "All in the Game," seems to be a different character than the Carl of the following story, "Carl Comes Home for the Holidays." People's common natures are highlighted in this way, though the characters of the book's shorter tales are also elusive because of their underdevelopment; many fill roles as servants of the plots.

Strong, declarative sentences are stacked throughout, instilling a sense of routine: "At lunchtime I went downstairs. A concourse runs under all the big buildings. It was crowded." This writing method suits the stories well, helping to emphasize the exceptional emerging from the everyday. And near the end of the book, the stories take an additional comic turn with a twisted modern mashup of the fairy tales "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Rapunzel," and a funny but realistic account of a young woman's quest to wed a wealthy man in Palm Beach. The loose feel and mocking tone of these and other stories end the book on a light, entertaining note.

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PETER DABBENE (September 17, 2021)

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