

Welcome to Canada: Stories

David Carpenter

The Porcupine's Quill (November 2009)

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Understated and poignant, David Carpenter's *Welcome to Canada: Stories* collects a number of flawed and beautiful characters who illuminate the fragility of human nature. The isolation, unpredictability, and grace of the Canadian wilderness sets the atmosphere and tone for these brilliantly crafted short stories, while the characters, many of whom are city folks confronted with the life and inhabitants of the Canadian bush, discover the meaning of redemption in situations that challenge their beliefs.

The stories, a combination of short and long form, illustrate Carpenter's uncanny ear for humor and reflect how geography and culture are reflected in the dialects and cadences of speech. In the title story, "Welcome to Canada," Carpenter superbly depicts the phonetic quirks of an adventure-seeking Texan named Lester, whose interactions with the locals are infused with the folksy levity of a social misfit. By the end of the story, Lester's unlikely relationship with his local fishing guide reveals the wistful sensitivity that lies beneath Lester's humor. In "The Ketzner," the short, terse sentences of the Potts family are fraught with emotional nuance. The longest story in the collection, "Luce," introduces a diverse cast of characters, including tough kids, tipping housewives, and a giant fish named Adolph. Carpenter's finesse with human frailty is at its most compelling when he looks at the world through the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy during a summer vacation. The most harrowing story, "Turkle," renders the harsh Canadian winter a capable and unforgiving opponent to the story's main character, a tough and stubborn father of three young children.

Carpenter's characters seek acceptance and connection, no matter how different they may be from one another. In "The Ketzner," Flora, a young woman in a family of hunting men, strives in vain to be noticed:

While her brothers talked hunting at the far end of the table, Flora, getting drunk with unaccustomed speed, began to clamour for her father's attention. He would not even look her way. Then they began to refer to her in the third person and this she could never stand.

Flora is a typical Carpenter character: someone who desires to be seen as one is, without apologies. This wish propels many of the characters' choices and underscores a thread of desperation that runs through the stories.

The omnipresent Canadian wilderness; the unexpected pairings of people from different social, cultural, and economic classes; and the eccentricity of characters make this collection a testament to Carpenter's skill.

Welcome to Canada: Stories will be a pleasure for short story aficionados and for those who respect the beauty and brutality of nature. Elegantly bound with exquisite paper and typesetting, this book is satisfying, profound, and entertaining.

MONICA CARTER (November 19, 2010)

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