

We're All in This Together: A Novella and Other Stories

Owen King

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Grouping a novella with short stories offers readers the chance to observe a writer's range of tone, subject matter, and general skill. In this debut by a winner of the John Gardner Award for Short Fiction, the reader is rewarded with stories that are varied in plot, yet manage to come together thematically.

The novella, which lends its title to the collection, takes place during the summer of 2001 in a small Maine town. The fifteen-year-old narrator, George, spends most of his time hanging around with his recently widowed grandfather, Papa, and avoiding his mother's fiancé, Dr. Vic. Papa is a socialist, a union organizer back in the day, and his great obsessions, which keep him from facing his grief, are Al Gore Jr.'s loss of the presidential election, and smoking pot. He assembles a billboard on his lawn stating his grievances with President Bush the younger, and it's soon vandalized by an unknown assailant. Papa suspects his former paperboy, and lies in wait for him, paintball rifle in hand, along with his smoking buddy Gil and George.

At one point George, a loner, goes to the local airport to watch the tourists arrive, and King's use of imagery is spot on: "On approach, they descended from the south, always skimming over the interstate at the same place, seeming to follow an invisible corridor, and sliding down the runway as easily as an arm pulling through a sleeve." His voice is adult-like, as if he were looking back on his boyhood with the advance of several years. As his adventures unfold, George grapples with his own prejudices; politics is on the minds of almost all the characters, from George's mother, who works at Planned Parenthood, to Gil, who voted for Nader. Naturally, one thinks of 9/11, knowing that tragedy is waiting in the wings, and the author takes advantage of this, as George recounts the summer with an air of removal.

The four stories that follow are a surprising mélange. The first, and the least satisfying, is "Frozen Animals." It's about an itinerant dentist addicted to alcohol and nitrous oxide, who must treat a Native American woman, married to a fur trapper, in the wilds of the Great North. Although the story is interesting and well told, it feels somehow pointless. The following story, "Wonder," about a Coney Island baseball player and a band of carnival freaks, not only feels authentic—King has a gift for diction and description—but also satisfying, for the main character turns a corner. Perhaps the best story of all is the last, "My Second Wife," an odd recounting of a cuckolded man and his one-night stand on the night of an execution. The only thing easy to predict about this story is that the author's narrative will remain unusual to the end.

OLIVIA BOLER (August 18, 2009)

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