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CLARION REVIEW ★★★☆☆ SHORT STORIES

While Waiting

L. Ray Born
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While Waiting positions expectations by invoking Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley; its stories present couples at dances relishing their evenings to the tune of “In the Mood” and “Darkness on the Delta.” The war generation appears in youth, and the same happy-enough enduring couples are revisited fifty years later, still holding together. The greatest pleasures, Born seems to tell us, range from free to inexpensive. The simple heartland nostalgia pieces of Ohio and Indiana eventually pick up fantastical content, culminating in “Sunset,” with an impossible visit to a phantom motel café with a jukebox that overrules human selections.

The book opens with a late boyhood journey of discovery, “Fred and the Summer of 1937.” The narrator and a sixteen-year-old fellow traveler get a rolling look at Missouri and Iowa, altering the plan as they go and sending penny postcards home. The principles share an attuned camaraderie like Kerouac and Cassady, though of considerably more innocence and better behavior. They awake mornings eager to move: “Each day had new places to see, new trails to follow, new problems to solve, new friends to make, new perils to face.”

The author edges away from old grandpa talk about halfway through the book. A couple stories preceding “Bo in Space Time” show a push-off from strict realism, but this piece is a full-on plunge into whimsical cosmology. A retired man and his electronics-wiz son perfect high speed space propulsion in the garage, and prove the professional physicists wrong about what is technologically possible.

Within the text Born’s narrators self-deprecate on writing skill, warning readers not to expect the most crafted prose. True enough, there are copy errors. Yes, the odd sentence is compressed until it squeezes out connective words and articles, but it should be overlooked, because here is someone with a knack for storytelling. The people of these stories characteristically haven’t soured on life, and they aren’t too scar-hardened to appreciate amiable companionship.

The warm fuzzy simpler-days stories don’t completely mesh with more speculative pieces, but there are laughs to be had, and twists of direction. Best of all there’s a long perspective and an affection for the tendency to organize memories around ironic incident, or a treasured period of quiet satisfaction. A passage from “The Dance,” the most sentimental among the dozen stories, reflects both the strength and flaws of this short yet varied collection. The desire of those at the dance is “to crowd into this night the past, present, and future of their young lives. They wanted it not to end.” Born’s upbeat voice offers up the secret to happiness: recognize wonder while it’s in progress, and multiply moments by telling anyone who will listen what made them both real and more than real.
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