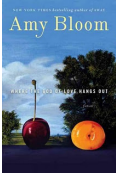


Where the God of Love Hangs Out



Amy Bloom, who used to be a practicing psychotherapist, has won many awards for her short stories. Her latest collection Where the God of Love Hangs Out examines love in many aspects. Bloom shows how it's possible to fall for an older man with a beer belly who suffers from gout and a life-threatening heart condition. The book features two sets of interrelated stories, the first about two couples--close, long-term friends--whose lives are broken apart and rearranged in new and unconventional ways. The second set of stories explores the lives of a jazz musician's widow and her young adult son, Lionel. These four stories reveal how grief makes some people emotionally vulnerable and susceptible to poor life choices.

The voice behind Bloom's stories is accepting, forgiving and kind, no matter what havoc and pain her characters create for each other. Those years on the other side of the couch have given Bloom an empathetic brush to draw her characters. As she said in an interview, "I've spent a lot of time listening to people, and I am endlessly intrigued by relationships, particularly by the gap between what people say and what they truly feel, and the gap between what they do and what they really want."

One of my favorite stories, "Between Here and There" begins with the shocking statement, "I had always planned to kill my father." Allison, who is now grown up, thought that even as a young child. She now must care for her senile older dad. As you read on, you find that when her mother died, her father did not even give the children their mother's jewelry to remember her by. The dad is also virulently anti-gay although his son has come out. The story shows how sometimes people can love their parents and at the same time dislike them immensely. Yet this dislike does not interfere with caretaking and yes, in the process brings moments of joy and tenderness.

Another story features an abused girl from the wrong side of the tracks who marries into a good family. Her husband and in-laws don't have a clue about her past, or her present either, especially when her drug-dependent Mom comes by to bribe her for drug money. Yet, the young woman, now pregnant, forms a bond with her father-in-law that allows her to come to terms with her troubled and secret past.

This is a marvelous collection of stories that reveals our human weaknesses and strengths. Each story shows the necessity for connection and dialogue with others, both those we love and even those we don't like at all. Amy Bloom writes with the wisdom of someone who has heard every heart-wrenching tale there is. As she said, "to know and engage with someone intimately is always a crossing of a border, always fraught...."

If you enjoy the short story form, try other collections by Alice Munro, especially Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage. Munro, a Canadian, writes, in my view, the best short stories of anyone. If you'd prefer to explore love from another cultural perspective, read Yiyun Li's Gold Boy, Emerald Girl. And not for the faint of heart, Mary Gaitskill's stories (especially Bad Behavior) explore the dark side of love and relationships.

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Posted by Dory L. on Jan 12, 2011



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