

Short End of the Stick



I have to admit, even as someone who has great appreciation for short stories, I often

find it hard to muster the same kind of enthusiasm for reading them as I do when approaching the pleasant immersion of a novel. But I've proven myself wrong so many times, as I take up a book with a sense of duty and find myself thoroughly enthralled instead. Short stories are perfect for those with a hectic schedule (or a short attention span); they offer condensed, pithy prose and plot, and they can often alert you to a new talent before everyone's going crazy for their debut novel. I was inspired to write this post by Daniel Orozco's Orientation, which I just read. "Officer Weeps" in particular is one my my favorite short stories ever. His characters are weird and liminal--a woman on a late-night cookie binge, an ex-dictator, a pair of officers falling in love amidst an odd vandalism streak--and he presents them with hilarious and terrible brevity. Here are a few other collections that I really enjoyed, written with a similarly strange focus and an equal blend of heartbreak and humor.

July, Miranda - No One Belongs Here More Than You

Pleasantly twee, these stories could be dark given their subject matter--like rejected, desperate women seducing teenagers or becoming sex workers--but their stylish, flat delivery puts more emphasis on the great strangeness of being human than the particular sadness of these situations.

Link, Kelly - Magic For Beginners

Deeply strange things are taken for granted in this supernatural book. It is the imagery that's most stayed with me--a house whose lawn is nightly taken over by scores of rabbits; a magic handbag; a late-night convenience store serving zombies. But don't underestimate Link's power to mine the deeply personal even as she dresses her stories in the outlandish.

Russel, Karen - St. Lucy's Home For Girls Raised By Wolves

Russel's novel Swamplandia! is a big deal now, and it began in this lovely collection's magical realism- and southern gothic-influenced tales of children and their joyfully and satirically described, odd and enchanted worlds.

Saunders, George - In Persuasion Nation

I love George Saunders. His surreal, futuristic dystopias are terribly plausible, pushed just far enough into absurdity to be funny without being only that. "My Flamboyant Grandson," for example, where a grandpa in the Big Apple begins to rebel at the constant, targeted barrage of customized ads, seems just a few steps away from our already over-saturated, over-advertised present.

Pro Tip: The library puts a red "Short Stories" label on the side of collections for easier browsing in the main fiction section.

Posted by mkinney on July 17, 2011

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