

What Their Lives Embody: Storytelling as a Gift

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

A Near-Perfect Gift: Stories, by R. M. Kinder. University of Michigan Press, 2005.

A fellow ex-patriot in Japan some years ago said he found it curious how we Americans were so interested in other nations' peasants, but not our own.

Thirty years later, I still ponder his remark. Perhaps the term is too Old World for American use. Nowadays, the term conjures up people with lives so meager as to invoke instant pity. It also implies a lack of education or culture. Yet who hasn't, at least once in her life, heard someone dismissed as a peasant, suggesting a person unworthy of our attention, except as a source of scorn.

Lucky is the person forced to learn otherwise, with in-laws, let's say, who farm, where talk at dinner tables and funerals and extended-family potlucks has as much flavor as anything heard in suburbia or the Bronx. (Perhaps more.) The landscapes of American "peasantry" (if we even agree to the term) are varied and indelible, shaped by hard work and hard times and a rich oral tradition. In fact, they are filled with storytellers and stories worthy of being told.

The Bootheel region of Missouri is one such place, which R. M. Kinder has brought to life in two award-winning collections, the first published in 1991 by Helicon Nine Editions, *Sweet Angel Band and Other Stories*. In the most recent book, *A Near-Perfect Gift* (winner of a Michigan Literary Fiction Award), the small fictional town of Buxton is again the focus. Cora Leban and her siblings return, as does her mother, Oida, and a host of other residents. Buxton is so small, "The teachers there were of two kinds: hardy and long-term residents of Buxton, or young and desperate to leave

before time found them forever rooted in a town totally barren and defiant of modern ways" ("Searching for Heroes"). Yet old men fish the Castor River with devoted regularity; and boys who thrillingly bedevil the town "witches" learn something about good manners.

While some of the smaller pieces feel slight—sketches more than stories—those fully fleshed among the 13 stories in *A Near-Perfect Gift* are as moving and redemptive as storytelling gets. Additionally satisfying in this confessional age is Kinder's control of third-person narration. Her best stories, in fact most of her stories, are written in some enviably controlled incarnation of the third-person voice. Also pleasing, throughout, is the manner in which dialogue serves character.

In "Pulse of the World," 16-year-old James wants a car more than anything. His married sister, visiting with her baby, has crowded the house. James is the middle child, surrounded by the much older and younger sisters who share the same father. James loves his family but shelters his pride, for he is a teen who needs space. The family interaction, as seen by James, crackles with the tension of an only son at the cusp of manhood.

"A Winter Snake" is the compact tale of a woman who turns an imagined snake in a woodpile into a reality. Her reality. It is also a wonderfully subversive take on "storying," or fibbing. Faithful to her absent husband, Martha Weaver, who works as a legal secretary, never retracts or confesses that she might be wrong. When the highway patrolman who has been making advances challenges Martha on her snake tale, she holds firm. "'You didn't see no snake,' he said. 'You're bored.'"

She felt flustered, angry. "Nobody knows anything about me," she said. She looked at his big hands on her legs, then at him. He was smiling.

"Look, buddy," she said. "I can fill out a complaint as well as type them."

He hesitated.

"And I can call the sheriff's office, too."

He lifted his hands straight up, palms out. "If you change your mind, honey."

"I won't tell you."

"With a Change of Seasons" follows the autumnal fate of two neighbors. Frank Cauley is retired and dying of cancer. All he wants is to be treated normally and to fish; yet every day, he must face his worried wife's persistent caretaking. Next door, their middle-aged neighbor Glenneth is dealing with workplace ageism and will soon be displaced. The neighbors are not intimate but friendly, chatting over the fence while they garden. Neither Frank nor Glenneth likes a fuss. When Frank, in an unusual moment of candor, urges her to stand up for her rights, go to the union, we know she will not. What binds them—and the story—from season to dying season is their shared ownership of a cat, Old Tom.

The gem of this collection is the aptly named title piece. "A Near-Perfect Gift" operates on several levels, not the least as a valentine to story-telling, itself, and the proper way to receive a story well told.

Seventy-year-old Oida still has a sense of wonder for the natural world. Gazing into her backyard, she observes the changing light and colors.

The light was already dimmer, and the ditch trees turning darker. Such color changes always amazed her—how trees were blacker than night, actually, when one knew they weren't really black at all; how the moon was ghost white in daytime, yellow and orange and red at night; how some flowers turned violent red when they didn't get any sun. How could a person ever know the real nature of a thing when it changed all the time? The world was a magic wonder, that was for certain.

An additional wonder unfolds when a bat crawls out of a hole in the ground, exposing its babies to save them. As the mother bat is kind of a gift to Oida, so is the story of the bat, which Oida carefully

frames for each of her three children. Their separate responses are pertinent.

But her son rushed her. He didn't tell her to hurry up or say he had guests or had just arrived home or was just leaving. But he wasn't *in* the story with her. . . . He had the sweetest, honey-soft voice, and she always felt loved when he spoke to her, like he was leaning down to put his arms around her. But he butchered her story.

By the time Oida phones her oldest daughter, her voice is weak from the triple telling. When she concludes her carefully rendered tale, the daughter responds, "I love that story, Momma. It gives me chills." And Oida thinks, "*That* was the right response."

Kinder's collections have been oddly compared to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Other than recurring characters and the small-town milieu, the tones of their writing have little in common. One leaves *Winesburg, Ohio* admiring the psychological honesty in spite of the collective misery. The residents of Buxton seem more resilient, finding comfort in surprising and humble events.

Kinder is as astute as Anderson about human nature, and her characters are authentic and convincing. Life in Buxton, Missouri, is also tough: neighbors die, kids taunt simpletons, and frustrated women make things up. Their told lives embody one of the cardinal rules of imaginative writing: Everything is worthy of our attention. Moreover, one finds a leavening humor throughout R. M. Kinder's work, and an acceptance of life's inevitable sorrows. Together, these qualities infuse the stories in *A Near-Perfect Gift* with equanimity and grace.