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Category: Narrative/Verbal Art

Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

By Claudia Gould. 2009. Logan: Utah State University Press. 124 pages.
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(^cVIEW LENGTH: 647 WORDS • ^rVIEW POSTED ON ^mAY 5, 2010)

^aNTHROPOLOGIST ^cLAUDIA GOULD^s *JESUS IN ^aMERICA AND ^oTH^rER ^sTORIES FROM THE FIELD* IS A COLLECTION OF RELIGIOUS-THEMED STORIES BASED ON ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH SHE CONDUCTED IN ⁿORTH ^cAROLINA, HER HOME STATE. ^tHE COLLECTION FEATURES SIX SHORT, UNRELATED STORIES OF VARIOUS LENGTHS THAT PAINT A PICTURE OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE REGION AND HOW FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGIOUS BELIEFS HELP FORM THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY.

^tHE BOOK BEGINS WITH A FOREWORD BY ^lEE HARING THAT DISCUSSES THE NATURE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FICTION AND HOW IT APPLIES TO THIS COLLECTION OF STORIES. ^fITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE FINAL STORY IN THE COLLECTION, ^oJACK AT THE ^mERCY ^sEAT,¹ EACH TALE IS INTRODUCED WITH A PASSAGE FROM THE ^bIBLE, WHICH HELPS THE READER GRASP THE THEME OF THE STORY TO COME.

^tHE FIRST STORY IN THE COLLECTION, ^oJESUS IN ^aMERICA,¹ FOCUSES ON A YOUNG BOY NAMED JESSE, WHOSE NAME, HIS PREACHERS TELL HIM, IS ^aMERICAN FOR JESUS. JESSE^s HOME LIFE IS COMPLICATED BY A FATHER WHO COMES AND GOES AS HE PLEASES. ^bY THE END OF THE STORY, JESSE HAS RECEIVED A CALL FROM GOD, PRESUMABLY SETTING HIM ON THE PATH TO BECOME A PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL.

^o^tHE ^rED ^cRAYON¹ RELATES A CHILD^s GUILT OVER STEALING A RED CRAYON, CAUSING HER TO THINK SHE WAS DESTINED FOR ETERNAL DAMNATION. ^tHE STORY CAPTURES THE NAÏVE INNOCENCE OF THE CHILD, COMPLICATED BY THE DOGMA OF ORGANIZED RELIGION. ^o^tHE ^mOUNTAINS OF ^sPICES¹ FOCUSES ON THE STRUGGLES OF AN INTERRACIAL COUPLE AND THEIR DIFFICULTY IN FINDING SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE.

^oPERSONAL ^sTORAGE¹ TELLS THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO STANDS TO LOSE

ALL OF HER POSSESSIONS DESPITE THE EFFORTS OF OTHERS TO HELP HER. ^sHE IS UNWILLING TO HELP HERSELF AND IS BOUND BY HER ATTACHMENT TO HER EARTHLY POSSESSIONS. ^tHIS STORY IS MY FAVORITE PIECE IN THE COLLECTION BECAUSE IT ILLUSTRATES THE CONUNDRUM THAT PEOPLE WOULD RATHER HAVE EVERYTHING TAKEN FROM THEM THAN MAKE TOUGH CHOICES AND WILLINGLY GIVE UP CERTAIN POSSESSIONS.

^oa ^mOMENT OF ^rAPTURE¹ FOCUSES ON A MAN WHO CAN'T SLEEP BECAUSE HIS NEIGHBOR³S DOGS ARE BARKING. HE MAKES A MIDDLE-OF-THE-NIGHT JOURNEY TO GET THE MAN TO QUIET HIS PETS, BUT HIS WIFE, SEEING HIS PAJAMAS STREWN ABOUT, MOMENTARILY BELIEVES HE HAS BEEN CALLED UP TO HEAVEN IN THE ^rAPTURE, AND THAT SHE IS LEFT BEHIND.

^oJACK AT THE ^mERCY ^sEAT¹ FEATURES TWO BROTHERS BORN IN THE ERA OF THE GREAT ^dEPRESSION. ^tHIS IS A DETAILED PIECE THAT EXPLORES JACK³S TOUR OF DUTY DURING *fiorld fiar* ⁱⁱ. JACK LIVES A LIFE OF SIN AND REALIZES AFTER MANY YEARS THAT HE HAS THROWN MUCH OF HIS LIFE AWAY. ⁱN THE END, HE REUNITES WITH HIS BROTHER ^dICK, WHO AGREES TO BRING HIM TO HIS CHURCH.

GOULD CONCLUDES THE BOOK WITH AN AFTERWORD THAT DISCUSSES HER FIELD RESEARCH AND THE ORIGIN OF EACH STORY IN THE COLLECTION. ^tHIS SECTION IS QUITE APPEALING, GIVING THE READER A WINDOW NOT ONLY INTO THE STORIES THEMSELVES, BUT ALSO INTO THE AUTHOR³S PROCESS AND INSPIRATION. ⁿOT ONLY DO THE READERS GET AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENJOY THE EXECUTION OF THE WRITTEN WORKS, BUT THE TEXT ALSO PROVIDES A SUFFICIENT AMOUNT OF MEANINGFUL ANALYSIS TO ALLOW SCHOLARS TO EXAMINE THEM AS LEGITIMATE, ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAITS OF THE PEOPLE FROM THIS REGION.

^tHE ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT IS EXCELLENT, MOVING QUICKLY FROM ITS SCHOLARLY FOREWORD INTO COMPLETE IMMERSION IN THE TEXTS THEMSELVES. ^oNLY AT THE END, ONCE THE STORIES ARE COMPLETED, DOES GOULD PROVIDE THE ORIGIN OF THE WORKS. ^tHIS STRATEGY ALLOWS THE READER TO ENJOY THE STORIES AS THEY ARE WRITTEN, WHILE PROVIDING THE MATERIALS TO REFLECT ON THEM AT THE END.

^oVERALL, THE BOOK³S STORIES ARE WELL-WRITTEN AND THE TEXT IS WELL-ORGANIZED. GOULD CAPTURES NOT ONLY THE DIALECT OF THE INHABITANTS, BUT ALSO THE DEEP-SEATED NATURE OF THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AS WELL. ^fHILE THE MARKET FOR SUCH A TEXT WOULD SEEM TO BE SOMEWHAT NARROW, THE STORIES THEMSELVES MAKE FOR AN ENTERTAINING READING EXPERIENCE.

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