

Directions For An Opened Body. Harvey, Kenneth J.

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REVIEW

Harvey, Kenneth J. *Directions For An Opened Body*. The Mercury Press: Stratford, Ont., 1990. 122 p. \$11.95.

GORDON RODGERS

IT HAS BEEN SAID of Raymond Carver's short stories that important things happen just before the beginning or just after the ending of the story.

Kenneth J. Harvey has effectively used this technique in a number of stories contained in his first collection of short fiction, *Directions For An Opened Body*.

Typically in this collection, the stories are relatively brief, are written in the first-person and present tense, and often begin when characters are *in extremis*: about to suicide ("The Passing of Time"), newly gone mad ("The Profound Liberation of Roy Purdie"), or experiencing the complete and final breakdown of a marriage ("Open House"). "Ballerina" and "Swan," on the other hand, are stories where we anticipate that something significant and most likely violent will happen after the stories end.

In these stories characters are caught "somewhere between brittle happiness and damnation" (49) or are experiencing "incidents of joy between unrelenting periods of misery" (117). "Incidents of joy" . . . maybe — for in Harvey's world such incidents seldom occur.

To this mix add: treachery and dislocation; situations which will undoubtedly strike some readers as foul and perverse; and a writing style which is exact and economical and moves a narrative along with relentless efficiency. The result is an intense, compelling reading experience. So much so that at times some readers may feel their sensibilities have been assaulted. This is by no means a bad thing.

Consequently, because of Harvey's technical proficiency, even when his fictions are flawed by, say, an all-too-familiar variation on the theme of who is

sane/insane in insane places (“Orderly”), or by the use of a “surprise” ending (“A Handful of Change”), they still have something to recommend them. To my mind, it is only in “My Sister’s Husband” that his strengths coalesce to create a story which is simply overwritten, self-indulgent and excessive, and which offers little insight, in this case into the shadings of role ambiguity.

The recurrence of geographical markers in these stories may indicate that Harvey is on his way to establishing a fictional territory — certainly psychologically, if not geographically, he has done so, and this created a problem for me.

In spite of, or, to be fair, perhaps *because of*, the power of individual stories which are similar in technique and style, and which are also coupled sometimes with a more or less implicit sanctimonious attitude (“Orange Shadows and a Sound that is the Two of Us” and “How We Sup upon this Misery” are examples), I found myself wanting more space, more breathing room, more air, more variation.

Unfortunately, two of Harvey’s variations from his usual form are among the weakest pieces in this collection. “Kissing” is a short slight piece, and in “Orange Shadows and a Sound that is the Two of Us” Harvey’s sentiment shows a rare lapse into sentimentality. If these pieces are not bad, they are certainly out of place in this collection.

That Kenneth J. Harvey is capable of achieving strong, less assaultive effects through more suggestive and subtle craftsmanship is, however, amply demonstrated in “Dad” and “Diagrams of the Brain” — the two best stories in this collection to my way of thinking.

“Dad” is the story of a son’s last visit with his father, and the meaning of the story hinges on the reader’s interpretation of the sacred or profane nature of a kiss. “Diagrams of the Brain,” the best this book has to offer, is a modern retelling of the story of the Good Samaritan. The narrator sees a man slip on a patch of ice and hit his head on the sidewalk: the subsequent detailing of the narrator’s attempts to help this man — and to help himself at the same time — is revelatory, not only of the narrator, but of helping professionals and perhaps society as well. By comparison with the other characters’ professionalism and/or grudging fulfilment of duty, the narrator’s self-interest, in its honesty, is refreshing. In addition to this, however, there is a dimension to this story which relates to the contents of the injured man’s shopping bag — suffice it to say here that the contents serve to bathe the whole story in a truly ironic light.

To this list of two stories, it would be easy to add a third, “Open House,” an excellent burlesque.

Despite a few misplaced pieces and weaknesses in some of the others, one is confident that there is a nimble intelligence at work behind these stories, and there is no denying their uncommon power — especially for a first collection.

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Most of these stories are worth rereading, and to my mind, that's the best that can be said of any story.