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Twelve luminous stories alive with friendship and secrets introduce a remarkable writer. Daphne Kalotay's characters confront regrets and unrealized hopes in tales tinged with gentle humor. A newly independent woman finds herself in bed with an ex-husband of long ago. A little girl gets a surprising glimpse into adulthood when she catches her mother in a moment of uninhibited pleasure. A thirteen-year-old boy contends with the unwanted attentions of a younger girl. And for two older women, a tie formed in their youth sustains them through varied twists of fate. These are dazzling intertwined tales of love, failure, and the comedy of human relationships.

Calamity and Other Stories Details

Date : Published May 9th 2006 by Anchor Books (first published 2005)

ISBN : 9781400078486

Author : Daphne Kalotay

Format : Paperback 193 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction



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From Reader Review Calamity and Other Stories for online ebook

Jennifer says

Reminiscent of Russian Winter with its references to poetry and a recycled character name. Wish I had pieced together that the characters were interwoven, but the stories do stand on their own.

Elizabeth Wix says

Thoughtful and sensitive.

Bendick Ong says

Calamity

November 18, 2009 in Of books | Leave a comment

Has been a while since i read an anthology of short stories.

Picked this up at a warehouse sale cos the cover looks deceptively simple. Just a muffin on a clean white plate on a wooden tabletop. Ordinary, neat... yet subtly enticing. And more importantly, with a title almost antithetical- calamity and other stories. Its almost like shouting silently off the rack.

Short stories are different from novels- and in my opinion, writing them requires better literary skills. A short story writer can easily train to become a good novelist but not necessarily vice versa. Mainly because when writing a short story, one must mold characters, develop the plot, hit the climax, deliver the punch in less than 20 pages.

And each story stands on its own, so if you have a collection of say 12 in a book, usually you have 12 storylines.

And most play with wicked satire; if not, they tend to use allegories and metaphors. You can scan through 100 pages of a novel within 15 minutes but you can barely do the same for a short story of 20 pages, cos the magic is oftentimes contained in between the lines, hidden in the choice of words, concealed in the description of mundane reactions. And the best part- You can rush through one thick novel and end off with a laugh, but to finish 12 short stories, you need intermittent rest and involuntary sighs in between.

Roald Dahl, for example, is one great writer when it comes to short stories. Though better known for *bfg* and *matilda*, his short stories can be really sinister at times- capturing the intricacies of human nature with an almost ominous play of language.

In this light, Daphne Kalotay is one of a kind. Cos her stories in this book revolve around one theme: gender issues. She captures the subtle differences between the two sexes using the most minute observations of human activities. Be it mockery on the manly-kind of embarrassment; the struggle in a woman who got back with her ex-husband; the early subtle exposure of an adolescent to adulthood; the excitement over a college prom; the reaction towards simple chores like doing laundry; the responses towards strangers; the

suggestiveness of platonic relationship; or the social pressure faced by both sexes, she is good in using the most ordinary events in life to bring out the dilemmas and predicaments involved.

And i like her choice of putting the highlighted story as the second last article in the collection- which actually caused me to finish the whole book be it her intention or not. Normally in anthologies like say the ugly duckling and other stories, the featured story is often the best one- or at least, the better-known. And the problem with most authors is they like to put their best in front as the first or second story- and it creates an unwanted effect: After reading the story, you feel the best is over- that the book is already 3/4 spent though say only 1/10 read.

On the other hand, by putting the feature story as the second last, this kind of kindle the curiosity of readers and make them eager to read the first few. Ok most readers, like me, will jump in straight to the second last to consider buying it or not, but after reading it, the book still looks inviting- its almost like telling people this may be my best but i have equally good ones which i placed in front. And once they read say 4 out of 12 stories, there is a better chance of they finishing the whole book.

Purely psychological, but well at least it works for me.

Kerry Waller says

Full disclosure - Daphne and I were friends from all the way back in elementary school, so I was really rooting for this to be good. And it delivered! I'm so mad at myself for not reading any of her stuff before now. I will certainly make sure to tackle some more of her work.

As for the book itself, I was really impressed how Daphne was able to write authentically in so many different voices - telling stories from men, women, boys and girls. Overall a light read - she doesn't make you work too hard, but there is still a nice payoff in the end. Recommend highly.

Elizabeth says

I really enjoyed *Calamity and Other Stories*. I found Kalotay's writing style to be very "clean". Her writing has a genuine quality to it. I love the small details: a book on the nightside table, the items in a kitchen pantry.. they contribute to the 'true' feeling of the stories. The book's interconnectedness made me think of the film "Me and You and Everyone We Know".

Jess says

The quiet short stories are comforting. I felt like I was able to really understand and empathize with this collection of interwoven stories and characters

Teresa says

I originally found and read two of these stories online. Not only did I enjoy them, but I also was intrigued by the main character's first name (not a common one) being the same as my daughter's, though the character pronounces it slightly different than we do. So I figured I had to buy this book to read the whole collection, and I'm glad I did. (On another personal note, other coincidences -- the spelling of another name and especially the universities attended by two other characters -- started to freak me out!) I especially liked the luminous first story and one called "Prom Season," which ends up being a comment on a cultural phenomenon. The touches of humor are especially fine, and I liked being able to see the development of the recurring characters through their own eyes and through others'.

Joslyn says

excellent & human short stories. i was pleasantly surprised by this random library selection

Abby says

Overall, I enjoyed this well-written short story collection and its characters. The author has a gift for capturing small, subtle moments and making the characters of interest to the reader, even when they are engaged in the most mundane tasks or thoughts.

The writing is fluid and thoughtful, but at times perhaps too subtle (especially in the stories' conclusions).

Also, I wished that the stories had been grouped in a more obvious or chronologically contiguous way with a focus on the strongest characters. The author's desire to shift the focal points of the stories among five or six people (within a collection of 12 stories) made it somewhat challenging to delve deeply into the understanding of each character.

Michael says

Fiction A-Z Book 'K': 'Calamity and Other Stories' by Daphne Kalotay

What a beautiful book of short stories this is. There's nothing showy or flashy here, just a writer with a solid grasp on what it means to be human and an incredible amount of talent with language.

Calamity is a collection of 12 stories, sometimes including overlapping characters and moments. But the overlap never feels gimmicky, like in other story collections I've read. The stories are focused on family, love, loss, and the little joys and little tragedies that make up each day. They are small personal stories about life and how we all deal with it.

Kalotay has a gift for phrasing--there are a number of lines spread among the stories that stand out in their perfection in describing a character or a situation.

I'm very happy to have found this book, and I recommend it highly.

Best of the Best stories: "All Life's Grandeur", "The Man from Allston Electric", "A Brand New You", "Wedding at Rockport", and "Anniversary"

Priya Singh says

Okay for some light-hearted reading.

I liked Sunshine Cleaners and Allston Electric. Difficult Thoughts was the most weird throw-in in this mix. Many stories were surprisingly ordinary, to the point that they felt less like stories and more like pages out of someone's journal.

The book started with mutually exclusive stories of unrelated characters, by midway I felt the writer really liked the name Rhea and towards the end, realised that the last 4-5 stories infact revolved around the lives of the same set of people. That should have worked if it was a consistent theme throughout the book. To me, it felt like the idea occurred to the writer 2-3 stories down the lane.

All in all, nothing spectacular about this collection. An average read.

Carolyn says

A very entertaining book of short stories...I came across this book a few years ago in Borders when I was looking for a Jack Kerouac book, and while scanning the shelf the author's name popped out at me! Daphne Kalotay was a schoolmate of mine from grade school through high school. How exciting 15 plus years later to have stumbled upon this book written by her! I am not usually one to buy short story books (I don't know why, just habit I guess) but of course I had to buy this one. I read it from front to back cover in a couple days, and I LOVED IT. This was a 4 or 5 years ago, so the stories are not fresh on my mind, although I specifically remember the short story with the piano teacher. She is masterful at creating a sense of time and place. I need to dig it up and reread it...I recommend it highly...it is a very a very enjoyable read. I am looking forward to reading her new book Russian Winter

Megan Pendleton says

This collection of short stories is a quick, enjoyable read. Much like the pilot episode of the tv show This is Us, the stories quickly begin to weave together (which is, at times, slightly confusing). In fact, I would recommend this book to anyone who enjoys the series This Is Us. Perfect qualifier.

Candice says

One of our library patrons recommend this, and since the author is at Lynchburg College this semester and will be speaking next month, I decided to give it a try.

I am not a huge fan of short stories, but I did like this collection. Many of the stories are interconnected and I liked seeing what happened to so-and-so from another story. I particularly liked "Prom Season" where a teacher tells the class that everyone must ask someone to the prom. It was sweet, but not fluffy. "Rehearsal Dinner" had a scene involving extreme hunger, a drive-thru window and a rental car that made me laugh. "Calamity" was suspenseful and thought-provoking. Kalotay has a wonderful sense of humor and there is depth to her stories. I can't wait to meet her in October!

I recommend this to Ellen because there are a couple of stories involving weddings :)

Jon says

A collection of twelve mostly loosely interrelated tales involving characters headed ultimately to a wedding, Kalotay does a good job of presenting middle-class life and concerns. These are well-written pieces that I am not surprised to see in print. They tell contemporary stories well, but they don't revolutionize the form or do anything else that might make them differ from other polished work.

"Serenade" recounts a girl's experiences with her piano teacher, who her next-door neighbor best friend also has for tutoring. The teacher is an artist of sorts, an effete musician, who appreciates all things beautiful, most especially women, in a somewhat lecherous way. But there's more going on than initially meets the eye, and not all of it involves the teacher, who essentially plays the part of a voyeur.

"A Brand New You" concerns a woman who meets her ex-husband (from eight years before) and ends up bedding him, even as she is trying to change her life, to become someone better than she used to be. What she finds, however, is a man who himself is on the decline, his good looks--his main attraction when a younger man--fading. There's certain poignancy in this story, the way this woman recognizes in the man weaknesses and sorrows that she hadn't seen before, ones that mirror some of her own.

Many of Kalotay's stories end on something of a subtle twist. That's the case with "All Life's Grandeur," which focuses on a teen forced to spend the summer with his father and his father's new love--and with an eleven-year-old girl whose devotion and friendship the teen dismisses and dislikes. There's a lot of sorrow in this story, wisely delivered.

That quiet despair is also part of "Prom Season," in which boys are told they must bring dates to the prom, and one, Mack, learns that there are things more important than getting the girl you want, things that can cause you to lose all you set out to accomplish.

The next several stories didn't hold my interest as much, as if having hit her stride, Kalotay was simply skating along traditional themes. "Sunshine Cleaners" involved Russian immigrants who worked in (but not for) a laundry facility, sewing up old clothes. Sergei wonders when he'll score big, whether he'll meet a woman, whether he'll make some real money. Each day a gal comes in and blames him for not fixing a machine that steals her money--"not my machine," he says.

"The Man from Allston Electric" deals with longing much like many of Kalotay's other stories do. This time, the longing is in the form of an electrician who comes to check on why an outlet isn't working. Rhea thinks of how much she misses her boyfriend--and has missed out on so many other chances for love.

"Anniversary" focuses on women getting together for drinks to talk about a son's impending wedding to the

"wrong girl." This was the first time I got the sense that the characters in these stories might be linked, as the name of a dropped girlfriend corresponded to the name of the woman in the previous story, and the name of the son corresponded to the boy in "Prom Season." The two women talk of love, and one of them thinks a lot about a dead husband. Thematically the story fit in well with the tales in this section of the collection, but I didn't feel like this piece really went anywhere. The main topic of the son Mack is almost completely dropped by the story's end as the piece changes focus to the dead husband.

"Snapshots" involves a wife's complaints about a house that her husband likes for its views and location. At times, there are wonderful moments in the marriage, like snapshots, but we get the sense that the marriage is ultimately doomed. A next-door neighbor holds much curiosity for the couple--the husband tries to figure out where the neighbor works, the wife goes with the neighbor into his house (the husband suspects there might be an affair occurring). The neighbor builds a tunnel into a closet in the couple's house, where he hides from time to time from the law. I thought this story, as odd as it was, seemed a good, realistic summary of a couple's relationship.

"Difficult Thoughts" does an intriguing thing insofar as Kalotay does not follow the usual script for a work that involves a majorly otherworldly detail. Most of the time, the story would focus on the odd turn of event that occurs in the tale; instead, Kalotay uses the event to bring the story to a close, leaving us uncertain to an extent as to its reality. The tale itself is about a woman student (Rhea, of "Allston Electric," among others) in Italy who falls for a pair of brothers who turn out to be playboys of a sort. Are they to be believed?

"Rehearsal Dinner" ruminates on love and breaking up and on how essential it is to have a significant other. It does so through a focus on Geoff, who a year earlier dropped a girl and who has been avoiding relationships since and how he comes to see a couple who pick him up on his visit into town and how natural they seem to fit together.

"Calamity," one of the better stories in the collection, focuses Rhea's flight to the aforementioned wedding. The plane turns out to have mechanical difficulties, for which Rhea's seat mate blames herself (because she is a jinx with regard to everything). Rhea and the woman become fast friends, however, after Rhea announces to the plane how the woman beside her is responsible. They discuss regrets and secrets, and Rhea learns that her former propriety is because she is a woman, which means she's learned to be quiet in the face of things that demand saying something.

"Wedding at Rockport" brings the characters from the various stories together, which proves an interesting way to construct the book. Knowing the background of the various peoples at the wedding makes for a different reading than one would make without the eleven stories preceding. A drunk maid of honor, for instance, is much more sympathetic when one knows the experience through which she's just passed. And that is really what is the most redeeming part of this collection, which does what great story cycles do--it builds little by little something much greater than the sum of its parts. It gives us a sense of a community of characters.
