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THE BOXFORD STORIES

A Short Story Collection

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Ribbon Wand Press

BOOK REVIEW

In this debut collection of short stories, Carson explores the daily lives, loves and frustrations of two tight-knit Mormon families in 1970s Maryland.

The first story of the collection, “The Gilded Door,” introduces the small town of Boxford in 1974. When the local theater begins showing XXX-rated movies, the local Mormon ladies are shocked. They decide to present wholesome entertainment two days a month to prove to the theater’s owner that he can make money without showing porno; however, as Ada Runyon discovers, few things are more predictable than carnal desire. The next story, “’Atta Boy” (which won the 2006 Association for Mormon Letters’ award for short fiction), follows Latham, Ada’s husband, a history professor who longs to be the next president of the local Mormon church. Latham spends a day wringing his hands and waiting for the phone call that will change his life, but he discovers nothing more than bitterness and the realization of his own inadequacy. Although these two stories present a multifaceted view of what it means to be Mormon, they don’t quite do justice to the rest of the collection. They present a much more simplistic view of Mormons vs. non-Mormons than the other stories, which use ambiguity to their advantage. Standouts include “Gypsy Holiday,” in which Ada’s anxiety over family friends not coming to Thanksgiving devolves into a stark admission of her loneliness and inability to connect with outsiders; “A Little Five-Minute Thrown-Together Something,” which lays bare the squirming insecurities of teenage crushes; and “Flirting Lessons,” which sees Ada’s teenage daughter, Ginni, taking a cross-country road trip with two friends that leads to panic when one goes missing. These stories are unexpected in their subtlety as they explore the reality of what it means to be Mormon—and human. From Ada—who notices that her friend Ruthalin is “reaching the huge-and-miserable stage weeks earlier with baby #10 than she had back with baby #6”—to Latham, who knows he’s stereotyped as “Joe Mormon,” to the young woman who doesn’t “want to be caught fussing with her hair, since she’d figured out, by now, that she was not the kind of person anybody would want to look at,” the characters here must confront the unhappiness and disappointment of life as well as their own uncertain feelings toward their faith.

A memorable collection that, although occasionally predictable, sheds light on a little-explored section of America.

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