

Claire Wilkshire. The Love Olympics

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BOOK REVIEW

Claire Wilkshire. *The Love Olympics*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-550-81908-3

The bittersweet consequence of a great collection of short stories is often punctuated by the fact that as a reader, you become gripped by the narratives, pulled into the intimate lives of characters and their circumstances just long enough you find yourself fully invested right as the story comes to a close. There are collections by authors like Lorrie Moore — a true master of the short story — whose characters are written so intimately, and with such proximity, that one's reading is tinged with the melancholy of truly getting to know a character at the same moment when that character's story ends and a new one begins. Lorrie Moore's oeuvre is quite comparable, in fact, to Claire Wilkshire's recent collection *The Love Olympics*, as both writers share a special knack for witty dialogue, metaphorical story-enders, and tenderness within tragicomedy that is devastating for the fact of its under-wrought realism. One of the best things about Wilkshire's collection, however, is that it provides a relief from the distress that Moore's stories (and their endings) cause: the characters are seldom gone for good at the end of Wilkshire's stories. Rather, they return through discussion, meeting, context, or interiority of the characters that follow them. The result is an impressive, complex collection that offers the breadth of many different stories (11, to be exact) all set in St. John's, Newfoundland, with the satisfaction of seeing them overlap and a realism of small-city living, wherein no one is granted the possibility of true anonymity. Each story stands well alone, but the intertextuality provides

an exciting conceptual linearity to the collection, bookended with two pieces (“Mothers” and “The Love Olympics”) that, written in the rare second-person singular, extend the invitation to the reader to become a character too.

Indeed, the collection’s title, *The Love Olympics*, encapsulates the agility, attention, endurance, and vulnerability that the stories take on, each one a journey into the trials and rewards that love in all its forms can offer. In the shortest story of the collection, “Grapes,” the surprising intimacy and care that teenage male protagonist Brandon glimpses between his grandfather and grandfather’s friend Ed hints to a call for intimacy between Brandon and his friend Seamus, one that had until that moment of recognition been steeped in anxiety and confusion. This realization is not punctuated by a massive shift on the part of Brandon, but rather a subtle shift, a turning of the key within him, which is hinted at and left for the reader, the story itself landing on grapes as a metaphor for things that can grow where you least expect them. Wilkshire convincingly conveys the confused interiority of young Brandon just as well as she takes up the voice of the wry Eileen, an elderly woman who reflects with grace and wit upon the many loves of her life, memorable as a character for statements like “my god, the smell of those roses, as if a beautiful woman had slapped you” (158). The male protagonist in “Snow” who endures a lost love through friendship-turned-romance is the same man who shovels the driveway of headstrong Eileen. In each case, the characters take on distinctive voices, overlapping through context rather than repetition. Eileen’s granddaughter Catherine makes it a point in “The Dinner” to venture out and thank the Nice Young Man for shovelling Eileen’s driveway. Those of us who have already read “Snow” are familiar with the scene already, recognizing this Nice Young Man as one of the first characters we’ve seen in the collection, an overlap that offers such satisfying familiarity and expansiveness between the lives of characters we thought we had left behind.

While the collection at large spans such a range of contexts and voices, the most recurring perspective we are offered is that of the

mother; there are many mothers in this collection, young and old. The longest story, “The Dinner,” details three middle-aged women who are all mothers and friends, and whose lives seem to exist at the heart of the collection, as many other characters relate back to these three friends in one way or another. Their night together for an annual dinner celebration employs a three-tiered omniscience, an intimate lens into their perspectives that, in each case, branch out into the women’s insecurities, histories, and interpersonal overlaps that have led them to this particular evening, details that feel as unexpected as they are fated. While this story does much of the heavy lifting for the collection at large, its propensity for branching off may also make it one of the weakest stories of the collection; in “The Dinner,” Wilkshire treats character development the way one might in a novel, presenting an abundance of detail that feels occasionally indulgent and digressive from the short-story form for which she otherwise showcases an intense deftness and precision. The intimate and nuanced perspectives that mothers offer in the collection overall, however, feel intensely honest, believable, and rewarding for their humorous and vulnerable emphasis on how impossible and life-affirming the experience of being a mother truly is.

Ultimately, at the heart of *The Love Olympics* lies a deeply humane, unpretentious look at love. The setting of St. John’s Newfoundland, a city that offers perpetual warmth and humanity in all of its hard-won splendour, places these characters, their hopes and losses and desires, perfectly. All of the pains of love experienced by the characters feel earned, because the stories are so well crafted, so close to the bone, that Wilkshire is able to remind us again and again that love, for all of its hurt, is worth it. In the collection’s final and eponymous story, the second-person perspective makes “you” the Olympian, and every hurt you’ve endured through love and intimacy is likened, metaphorically, to the act of completing a biathlon, an Olympic sport that requires endurance and speed as well as enough precision and control to shoot a rifle at its target in the midst of heart-bursting adrenaline. This metaphor closes the collection perfectly, as Wilkshire’s

is not a romanticized and fluffy love, but one that requires as much grit and determination as it does softness.

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