*JOY*, by Erin McGraw reviewed by Sienna Ruiz

Counterpoint

Erin McGraw has written three novels and three short story collections which have received great reviews. Her essays and stories have also been published in numerous magazines. McGraw’s newly released book *Joy* contains 53 captivating short stories making characters with ordinary personhood seem animated and notably distinct.

*JOY* is an addictive read, and its most enthralling aspect is the dynamic characters. These characters range from a cruise musician in love with a passenger far younger than him to a man who becomes the impulsive murderer of a child. In the story “Priest,” McGraw upsets our expectations of what it means to be priestly. We get a priest who only helps people to fill his time so that he doesn’t find the urge to act out on his anguish. A passage that shows this the best would be at the end of the story where we get the priest almost attempting to hurt himself, but not following through by remembering his duties that must be fulfilled:

“The razor blade makes a light pinging sensation on his skin; it’s keen and unexpectedly light-hearted. Father Tom is teasing himself; nothing will come of this. He has too much work to do. Just a week ago he agreed to spearhead a new out-reach to troubled youth downtown, an agreement he made while knuckling a finger backward painfully under the desk. ‘I’m so glad,’ said the social worker who had called the meeting… ‘No one reaches people better than you do. Sometimes I think, when I look at you, that I’m seeing the face of Jesus.’ ”

He is able to fool everyone else into thinking he is this kind, revered individual despite the impulsiveness he has of hurting himself. The complex characterization of the priest is effective because it makes him seem more human. In society, we think of priests as Godly individuals lacking imperfections or the ability to sin. This story sheds light on the idea that even one of the holiest individuals on Earth can too sin and is more human or relatable than one might think.

Not one single story is similar to another, all 53 vary in plot. As mentioned above, we get a wide variety of characters; a hand model to a man running an advice column. In turn, being introduced to many distinct individuals with different jobs and personalities allows for the book to have unique types of stories. The reason why this works so well is that each individuals story revolves around the ‘criteria’ that makes them who they are. That criteria being romance life, to age, to where they live, to their job, etc. The hand model could not have gone through similar issues to the man running the advice column because his situation of life does not allow him to be in similar circumstances. Each story revolves around the main characters storyline and so the next story is always different making one want to read more by being interested in finding out what type of character and conflict might be next.

Although all stories differ, we get a couple that overlap. The context and events going on are the same, but the point of view changes. In “Comfort (1),” we get the perspective of the first-time murderer and in Comfort (2) we read the p.o.v. of the mother of the child who died. One more story in the book does this and it’s Soup (1), (2), and (3). In this point of view shift, we read about the husband with the wife with cancer, the friend who acts as a caregiver, and the wife with cancer. Both stories experiment with this and doing so allows the reader for complete insight in every character’s mind which allows for many different perspectives on situations that take place. At times, the insight on specific characters with this p.o.v. style creates dramatic irony because the reader knows things going on with the character that the others don’t.

Another aspect the author uses effectively is detailed descriptions throughout the short stories. Although most stories are only a couple of pages, much description is given to the reader about surroundings and other characters habits and personalities are described throughout. The first paragraph in Bucket (2) does a good job at showing this:

“Eddie comes in the door with his nightly smile already in place. Before we got married, I never knew whether he would come home happy, paid, and reaching for me, or whether he’d roar in like a comet, burning everything he touched. Or whether he would come home at all. It was thrilling, the not-knowing. Every word he said was singed a little at the edges from the rage he carried everywhere.”

From this intro, as a reader, one is immediately able to understand the relationship between these two characters and get an idea of how they might behave in other situations.

Each story contains a strong tone, too, which helps add to the addictiveness of the stories. “Nutcracker” does a good job of showing the emotion and feelings of each character through their dialogue and tone:

“ ‘I wanted so much to be Clara,’ Grandma is saying. ‘To dance with the Nutcracker Prince! Oh, I used to dream of it.’ ‘Clara is an idiot.’ ‘Here it comes,’ Mom says to Grandma. I didn’t think she would start with the ugly until she was a teenager.’ ‘Serves you right.’ Grandma says to her. ‘She *is* an idiot.’ Tears start to crowd my voice and that pisses me off. If we’re going to have this stupid conversation, I don't want to blubber.”

This conversation between mother, grandmother, and daughter is more hostile than kind, but it’s almost sort of comedic. All the emotions and banter make one imagine a dramatic comedy. The grandmother and mother almost have joy out of making the daughter feel left-out and unincluded.

Throughout the collection, we get a strong idea of the relationship between the characters just by the tone in the dialogue. The fact that each story is significantly different and unique from the next makes one as a reader become hooked. While reading *Joy,* I had to pace myself so that I wouldn’t finish it in one sitting. I highly recommend this book if you’re trying to get into short stories or if you want to read a diverse book with many different plots and structures. Personally, I’ve never read a book containing numerous short stories and enjoyed every single story. But, with *Joy,* I’m gladly surprised to say that every single one captivated me.