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on William Kittredge

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William Kittredge
We Are Not In This Together
Graywolf Press
Port Townsend, Washington
1984
\$6.00

The assertion has been ventured before and I venture it again here—that William Kittredge is, to put it minimally, one of the leading short story writers in this country today. In my opinion *We Are Not In This Together*, his new book of eight stories published by Greywolf Press, pretty much settles the matter for the foreseeable future. His is the voice of today's northwest as clearly as, in their day, F. Scott Fitzgerald's was of the northeast or William Faulkner's of the south. And yet, like the work of these two masters, Mr. Kittredge's stories far exceed their regional boundaries, press beyond them through his skill and passion into the circle of the universal.

The stories in this collection are so very immediate and real that reading one is like entering an actual life, *in medias res*, meeting his characters in the flesh, right up close, very close. The sound of their talk, their looks, clothes, condition in life—always tragic or on tragedy's verge—their very names and the names of their towns (as Raymond Carver notes in his praiseful and graceful *Foreword*) all together make a perfect oneness. And the texture of the prose is perfectly suited for such evocations of the real. Take this cross sectional swatch from the very beginning of this collection's opening story, *The Waterfowl Tree*, in which a father and son go hunting together with tragic results for both:

They ran into snow almost two hours before reaching the valley, the storm at twilight whipping in gusts across the narrow asphalt. The station wagon moved slowly through the oncoming darkness.

"A long haul," his father said. "Eva will be wondering."

The boy, tall and seventeen, his hands behind his neck, watched out the glazed and crusted side windows at the indeterminate light. This mention of the woman could be a signal, some special beginning.

"Is she pretty?" he asked.

"Pretty enough for me. And that's pretty enough."

The man laughed and kept his eyes on the road. He was massive, a widower in his late fifties. "I've got too old for worrying about pretty," he said. "All I want is gentle. When that's all you want, you got to be getting old."

In a little while the man said, "I remember hunting when I was a kid. It was different then, more birds for one thing, and you had to kill something with every shot."

"How do you mean?" the boy asked.

"We were meat hunters. You spent money for shells, you brought home meat. I saw Teddy Spandau die on that account. Went off into open water chest deep, just trying to get some birds he shot. Cramped up and drowned. We hauled a boat down and fished him out that afternoon."

The snow began to thin and the man pushed the car faster and concentrated on his driving.

"It was like this then," he said. "Snowing and ice a foot thick and below zero all day."

There are several observations to be made about this opening passage in the book and I'll use it as my single text here for reasons of space. The passage not only puts us at once into the very middle of things in the lives of these characters but also illustrates from the start what I take to be a seminal contribution by Mr. Kittredge to the modern short story, a vital addition to the tradition of realism. By this I mean to point out the author's consistent, wonderful and entirely original use of the flashback, his ever-present employment of the past, personal or historical, in his stories.

The short story, because of its brevity has had great difficulties with flashbacks and writers for the most part have tended to avoid them almost entirely. No room. The plot, movement, characters proceed linearly in time, lightly, simply, toward a closeby end. One scene, two scenes three, perhaps four or five, but all in the here and now—then the closure. There are exceptions to this among writers but these haven't been consistent or ongoing for the most part and therefore have not had a decisive effect on the modern aspects of this form. The usual attempt to give the short story more weight, more intensity and extension, or even more contemporaneity, entail experiments in moving inward, into the characters themselves or into the author himself or herself, through the use of ambitious, lyrical and sometimes humorous (vid. Donald Barthelme and such) displays of flashy prose and scenes that are often discontinuous and autistic in the manner of some contemporary poetry. These experiments tend to move away from the realistic tradition itself.

Kittredge's experiments with the uses of time past, however, stay well within the traditional framework of modern realism. The name of the game in this tradition is to show all that can be seen or heard in the starkest and briefest as well as in the most natural and convincing terms. How then can Kittredge add the intensifying length of extended flashbacks without overburdening his tales, time-logging them, sinking them with the weight of action-stopping asides?

The answer is simple and far different from the complex and antirealistic solutions offered by many experimentalists. He achieves his ends by a fabulous technical mastery, pure skill, that unanalyzable quantum often called genius. His excursions into time past are always exquisitely shaped to fit into the dashing forward movement of the tale he is telling in its here and now. His retrospective glances backward are perfectly controlled and wrought. Each is a small tale (sometimes of a single line, sometimes of several paragraphs, sometimes it consists of a part of the dialogue going forward) in itself, with its own contributory plot or information, its own movement in time, setting and characters. And every single one is designed to swell, deepen and intensify the whole rushing story he is telling.

Since all of Mr. Kittredge's stories here deal with characters who live in the northwest and whose personalities and conflicts stem from earlier contexts that are always both historical and personal, this amazing ability to move backward and forward in time so effortlessly, unifies past and present in a glorious, entirely fresh and original manner.