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The Middle of Nowhere: Stories by Kent Nelson

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The Middle Of Nowhere: Stories

Kent Nelson

Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991.

\$18.95; cloth.

Reviewed by Claire Davis

“Imagine living every day wondering whether you had done the right thing, whether you ought to go to some new place, whether you still loved your wife.” That question, posed in the concluding story, “Invisible Life,” defines the movement of *The Middle of Nowhere*.

Nelson is a writer coming into his prime, and these thirteen stories reflect that. In his first collection, *The Tennis Player*, Nelson’s craft was already evident; in this book, Nelson exhibits an empathy and respect for his characters—an affection for their fallibility—that was less evident in the earlier collection.

The title story, a Pushcart Prize winner, introduces a young man who is literally in the middle of nowhere. He lives at “the end of a dirty road which petered out into the Baboquivari Mountains” southwest of Tucson. He occupies a trailer home with his father where “the previous tenants had seen fit to throw their trash into the steeper ravine.” From this remote station, he has a chance to take shelter and come to terms with his past—his failure to save his mother from herself—and with the present, his father and his father’s women.

“The Trogon Dish” chronicles an older couple’s attempt to escape the fate of most retirement couples, an “old age house on Bellaire playing solitaire and listening to game shows on television.” They buy a trailer so they can “pull the camper onto a stretch of deserted beach and live from the land—gather bananas and papayas, shoot jungle fowl and fish in the sun.” In Mexico they find the jungle less accommodating than anticipated. Aiken, the elderly man, is a carefully drawn character, a man of questionable generosity. The reader is gently let in to see how little this man is capable of giving, until the moment when a merciful and generous gesture toward an in-

jured animal brings Aiken face to face with what he's always feared. Nelson makes this couple live and breathe. We believe they are enmeshed in each other's small failures, and we come to understand how they survive and still love.

If Nelson's characters are complex and vivid, so is the landscape he sets them in. His love of the land and wildlife is evident in many of the stories and the details are brightly rendered and pertinent, especially in "The Mine From Nicaragua," winner of an O'Henry Award. The setting is an island beach where a "few live oaks and pines had been preserved amidst the huge houses, and several rows of accreted sand dunes protected the houses from the water as well as from the riffraff who sunned themselves there on the beach." A group of people find themselves examining something washed up on shore. But it is the lives of the characters washed up on the beach that become the artifacts of greatest curiosity.

There are few missteps in this collection, although some of the stories do not come up to the same standards of excellence. "I Had To Do Something" is a good, solid story, but the device of a woman coming to grips with the unfaithful husband's leaving, by means of chopping her own firewood, seems a little too heavily laden with inherent symbolism. The story is predictable despite the charming invention of a young child who wears a snorkel throughout. "The Tarpon Bet" is a chilling story of two men making bets for each other's wives on a fishing trip. But the narrative fails to take a clear stance where one is essential to an uncompromising reading of this morally frightening tale.

Still, the collection is a strong offering by Nelson with a clear thread moving throughout, holding it together for a more satisfying read than most short story collections offer. Nelson knows story and how to tell it. He may start us out in the middle of nowhere, but we don't stay there for long.