

Three debut short story collections

The Graybar Hotel by Curtis Dawkins

The Lucky Ones by Julianne Pachico

The Burning Ground by Adam O’Riordan

Review by Melanie White

Three of summer’s debut collections of short stories address confinement and limitation in various ways. The most obvious treatment of such themes comes in Curtis Dawkins’ *The Graybar Hotel* (Canongate, 210pp, £14.99), written about prison life in the Midwestern U.S. by a convict serving a life sentence for murder. Although Dawkins no longer has recourse to the outside world for material, his observation that “all people are stories” serves him well. With pathos and humour, he depicts a panoply of distinctive jailbirds: the guy willing to attempt suicide to get out of the slammer; a prisoner trying to convince the authorities that he’s pregnant; ingenious engineers of everything from toilet-paper chess pieces to makeshift tattoo guns.

One thing that all of Dawkins’ characters have in common is a propensity for dreaming. In a place of intense boredom and long stretches of empty time, all that’s available to the inmates is fantasy. This is the main fuel for Dawkins’ fiction and, with a light touch, he conveys the frustration and loneliness simmering beneath the surface of characters whose main entertainment consists of daytime soap operas, telling tall tales, and making random collect calls in the hope of fleeting contact with someone in the outside world.

The latter forms the focus of “A Human Number”, which blends poignancy and humour in typical style. Dawkins’ narrator reaches an oddball called Kitty-Kat who enjoys ranting down the phone, providing enough of a sense of connection that Dawkins imagines entire visitor conversations with him. In one of these, he daydreams that Kitty-Kat offers a kind of moral exoneration:

“I was a worthwhile person, he said. I wasn’t damaged, or diminished or anything just for the mistakes I’d made, and seemed to keep making. What would happen is this: in certain people, failure could turn into an asset. Failure could make you a better person. It could turn into success.”

Self-delusion and retreat into fantasy become key elements of survival in a place of lurking violence, despair and aesthetic grimness (even the colour of freshly painted walls – pale green over orange – looks “like an old bruise or gangrenous flesh”). In an ironic twist to the above story, Kitty-Kat ends up sounding more psycho than the imprisoned narrator. *The Graybar Hotel* is devoid of any sense of self-pity, yet it’s hard not to feel sorry for Dawkins and his fellow inmates, straining for the slightest experience of the outside world, whether real or imagined.

Julianne Pachico in *The Lucky Ones* (Faber & Faber, 259pp, £12.99) conjures a less conventional type of captivity in her Colombia-centred collection, peppered as it is with rebel fighters and their prisoners. The English-professor hostage in “Lemon Pie” (disclosure: first published in *Shooter Literary Magazine*, this reviewer’s publication) resorts to fantasies of teaching *Hamlet* to retain a tenuous grip on sanity after years in the rebels’ custody. Pachico skilfully parallels Hamlet’s madness (his “antic disposition”) with the professor’s, as he arranges jungle sticks and leaves into a classroom of “students”. Other diversions include his game of “Thinking and Picturing”, in which the professor mentally recreates every inch of his old apartment. “It’s important not to get too sidetracked during Thinking and Picturing,” he reminds himself, “not to go spinning off into the

stratosphere of endless, dangerously random thoughts.” The mind will either sustain or break you; memory, in many of these stories, is a source of either comfort or torture.

The way Pachico layers memories – usually from recurring characters’ childhoods – sometimes overloads her narratives with italicised reams of flashback detail that bog down rather than enrich her stories. The weight of information-overload risks obscuring more than it reveals. Still, Pachico effectively parses cultural divisions within Colombia (between rich and poor, establishment and revolutionary) as well as between Colombia and elsewhere in the world. The student in “Honey Bunny”, trying to lose herself in New York nightlife, puts up with superficial assumptions about her country (“Did your family, like, know Pablo Escobar?” one clubber asks). Ultimately she finds some comfort in confronting the relics of her past, but it’s a fraught acknowledgement: unpacking her childhood souvenirs, “She lies down, cradling them against her cheek, smelling their sweet familiar scent ... Never mind how much her eyes burn, or her nose itches, or the back of her throat goes numb.”

In *The Burning Ground* (Bloomsbury, 189pp, £16.99), the constraints suffered by Adam O’Riordan’s characters stem more from their own limitations than external circumstances. His expat Brits (most stories are set in California) seek more than they find, pursuing L.A. relationships that go nowhere, more comfortable with strangers than people in their own lives. O’Riordan spins several of the stories out of encounters with strangers and, perhaps partly to do with this, many of the tales end up feeling hollow given the preponderance of restless drifting and empty interactions. “Magda’s a Dancer”, comprised entirely of dialogue, features a kind of phony expat exchange between couples in L.A. that comes off as unredeemably vacuous:

“We’re out of wine. I’m going to 7-Eleven. Harry, do you want to come with?”

“Why don’t we all go? We can’t really leave our guests here alone.”

“Hey, I’m game. We stand more of a chance of survival if we move in a pack.”

“Yes, let’s all go! Fun!”

O’Riordan has previously published poetry and shows a poet’s eye for minute detail in his prose. Very occasionally, this yields something lovely (“Harvey’s cigarette butts littered the terrace like the droppings of a caged bird,”) but more often the effect is heavily pedestrian. His symbolism is also sometimes painfully obvious, as well as repetitive: storm-lashed plane rides occur in several stories, in tandem with turbulence in the characters’ lives. The pieces in *The Burning Ground* are more vignette than story: as one character’s artwork is described, “exercises with no coherent theme,” and as such they fail to rock the reader.