

Shelf Life of Happiness

Virginia Pye

Press 53 (Oct 23, 2018)

Softcover \$17.95 (186pp)

978-1-941209-82-0

Drawing inspiration from the most existentially bored quarters of the sweater-set crowd, the short stories of Virginia Pye's *Shelf Life of Happiness* are unsettling, sighing laments.

They organize church fundraisers and clean their children's faces, elbow with society and act upon ceremony. But they also live through—or don't—betrayal, disillusionment, and disease. For the characters of Virginia Pye's stories, to declare that the world is "a beautiful place and the people in it good" is "an act of defiance."

Prone to cringe at their own moments of pomposity, Pye's characters are teachers, artists, parents, and students living ordinary, beneath-the-radar lives in long-charted territories. What binds their stories together is that they all yearn for more, even when "more" is undefined and potentially gruesome. The secrets that they keep are that they have few secrets; to fill in the gap, dogs are gunned down and sparrows are buried. A small-town family's murder inspires unspoken, thrilling fears.

In "Crying in Italian," a mother and wife spends her family's vacation "looking for the finger bones and femurs of saints," as well as for the words to tell her husband that it's over. In the wistful and mournful "Best Man," a Reno elopement may be easy to procure, but reckoning the fluid lines between love and friendship is ever complicated.

In one story, an aspiring young skater feels very wise as he appraises his parents' compromise-laden lives and looks toward his own future. In another, an aging Ozarks artist is wooed by, and is expected to woo, a gallery owner—but at what cost? What's dead stays dead in "Easter Morning."

Shelf Life of Happiness thwarts comfort and overturns certainties with its reminders that life is more lively when its rhythms are resisted.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (November/December 2018)

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