

Tales from the Backyard: Stories Told at Dinner

Carolyn Gaye

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Humorous and endearing, the short stories collected in Tales From the Backyard go beneath the surface of everyday stories to discover universal connections.

Carolyn Gaye's diverse short story collection *Tales from the Backyard* focuses on the shared histories of ordinary people.

Arranged in three sections, each increasingly longer and named after the stages of a dinner party, the book meditates on passing moments, internal mysteries, and those who do not feel like the main characters in their own lives. Ordinary people and everyday situations are focal in many tales, as with the ups and downs of a long marriage, feelings of disconnection from a family history, and seeing a new side to someone who is well-known.

"Elevator Operator" is about how people present themselves, with observations and asides to reflect outside responses. "The Little Old Man" opens like a fable, and its central character feels unknowable as a result. "Greyhound Bus" is about a person's particular feelings during a 1965 travel day to a new life; what led to their decision, and what happened when they arrived, is not included, though. And "House of Truth" is a story of betrayal, risk, and intrigue, told from the point of view of a person tangential to the events—who, indeed, hears about them secondhand.

Characterizations are developed through experimentation with style throughout, as with Flora in "The Perfect Husband," whose exhaustion is conveyed over the passage of time. And playful imagery appears: A flock of birds is viewed as a "feathered procession"; a bit of tangerine lipstick "shines" in an otherwise overwhelming room. Intrigue is implied with a few words.

While internal monologues dominate, the book's instances of dialogue are often funny. They reflect their speakers' mental states well, as where repeated phrases convey a character's feelings of distraction. Historical and political topics are dealt with in a thoughtful manner, too. Further, a range of cultures are represented across the book. In these tales, people search for new adventures, get more than they bargained for, and attempt to create a sense of purpose in roles that few people take notice of. Sensory descriptions and odd narrators make many of the entries entertaining and memorable as well.

Indeed, each story is distinctive. In some plotlines, the drama is viewed from the sidelines. In other stories, change is elusive. Delightful moments arise throughout, holding attention. However, some entries are more vignettes than fleshed-out stories. And as the book continues and the styles of its stories continue to vary, cohesion becomes too elusive. In this end, this lack of connective tissue proves distracting to the book's success on the whole.

Still, *Tales from the Backyard* makes an impact as a musing short story collection about everyday moments and personal connections.

M. W. MERRITT (February 15, 2025)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to

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