I Still Don’t Even Know You
by Michelle Berry

Reviewed by Heidi Greco

When Michelle Berry sits down at the keyboard, the letters that fly from her fingers seem to spell out: character, character, character – and so many of those characters are exactly the kinds of remarkably unremarkable folks everyone seems to know. They live in dead-end towns with names like Onion Corners. They hang out at the local 7-Eleven, they shoplift, they smoke too many cigarettes, they forget why they ever might have fallen in love with the person they’re with.

This last point seems to be the case in several of the stories, including the title piece. In it, Jack and Rebecca are visiting a ski-hill, a place where neither of them seems to really want to be, celebrating their tenth wedding anniversary. Each partner holds the other back in small ways; each holds him/herself in place as well. When Jack has trouble starting a fire in the bedroom fireplace at their ski chalet, Rebecca, who’d been a camp counsellor through her teens, starts it for them. “But Jack got all huffy about it and soon Rebecca was wishing she could douse the fire and go to bed.” (52) It’s self-driven regrets such as these that bring us into the quiet, inside rooms of their relationship.

And it’s these inner rooms of relationships where Berry takes us so successfully. In “Just Like Rain,” a son lingers with his father outside the hospital room of the man’s long-estranged wife, the father looking to his adult child for the no-training-wheels-on-the-bicycle push towards that bedside, the place he isn’t sure he can make himself go.

Hospitals serve as the settings for several of the stories, sometimes as places of safety, often as places for discovery. And while in these faceless settings, characters take refuge in the smallest tokens that might offer human connections:

The woman takes the Kleenex and I notice her fingernails. Just like mine. Glue-ons with big candy hearts painted in the middle. She chose white nail polish, I chose green for Christmas.

“Hey,” I say.
She looks at my nails. She smiles. (81)

But if the building blocks of her stories are the people who inhabit them, it’s the situations they find themselves in that make them all that much more knowable. They experience such abnormally normal experiences – getting scared by a man following them in the night, running over a cat on the road – terrible, but so very possible, the reader can’t help but believe.

For those of us who try to write, especially those of us who try to write short fiction, Berry is a writer whose skills must be admired. It might be establishing a character with barely a sentence: “Percy Q is wearing a bright green dress and he’s decided to wear it to the wedding even if it will shock the hell out of everyone.” (19) It might be sustaining a mood throughout an entire piece, leaving us still unsure at the end whether we’ve met a serial killer. Or it might be bringing us into the process of writing – in a story about a writer writing a story, with the writer even wondering whether “her story is sounding too much like a Raymond Carver story.” (161)
This spiral of stories within stories is one of the many techniques Berry uses in building the real worlds she creates on the page. Yet even though many of those stories are ones we’ve all heard before, they don’t ring any less true: “It’s the old don’t-be-like-me talk. Missy’s heard it a thousand times. Don’t smoke or drink or do drugs. Don’t have sex with older boys. And especially – don’t get pregnant.” (176)
And when it comes to using sensory imagery, she squeezes in so much:

They drove all afternoon to get here. They…drove until Maggie fell asleep sitting up in the front of the truck, bumping and swaying, her nose full of the scent of hay and clover and chickens. She woke to the sounds of the city, an air brake squealing, she woke to find her daddy munching a doughnut, sprinkled, holding one out to her, the truck stopped at a rest station. He was waiting for her to wake up so she could pee in the stinky washroom. Waiting for her to wash the sleep out of her eyes, to get that sour, late-afternoon-nap look off her face. (192–3)

Because the stories are unlinked, plot-wise, readers can approach this collection on their own terms. And while there might be a couple of pieces that don’t quite fulfill the praise I feel this author deserves, I’m sure the book offers enough to convince readers that Michelle Berry is a writer whose work we need to know better. ♦

Heidi Greco’s novella, Shrinking Violets, is being published by Quattro Books in spring 2011.

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