The Lizard and Other Stories
by Michael Bryson

Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

Toronto writer Michael Bryson’s latest collection of sixteen short stories offers an intriguing look at contemporary urban relationships—how people meet, why they break up, and the redemptive power of love. Most of the stories in the collection have been previously published. In fact, “Sandwich Factory” was nominated for the Journey Prize and “Six Million Million Miles” was included in 05: Best Canadian Short Stories.

Bryson is well known in literary circles as the founder and editor of The Danforth Review, an online literary magazine published between 1999 and 2009. He has published two previous short story collections, Thirteen Shades of Black and White (1999) and Only a Lower Paradise (2000).

Some of the stories in this collection centre on friendship. One of the most poignant pieces, “Hercules,” tells about two construction workers, a young wayward man and a long-time employee who mentors him. Only after Hercules’s death does the young man begin to appreciate the extent of Hercules’s positive influence. In the story “Flight,” two men have been friends since high school, but one is always more popular with the girls. As the two friends reach adulthood, jealousy sets in, altering the nature of their relationship.

Each story crackles with intensity. One of Bryson’s talents is the ability to describe a setting in a few sentences. In “Flight,” he states, “The hotel was part of an American chain that linked metropolitan areas around the world like a global charm bracelet. The hotel had a round marble lobby ringed with red, white and blue curtains. In one corner, Coke competed with Pepsi . . .”

Interspersed within the collection are four brief vignettes about an unnamed boy and his parents. These stories offer a note of innocence in sharp contrast to the final three pieces with their post-9/11 settings.

Occasionally, Bryson adds a dollop of humour to his wry observations. In the title story, “The Lizard,” a young man is haunted by his memory of swallowing a salamander
on a dare when he was six years old. Thereafter, thoughts of the lizard often come to mind—usually during the adult protagonist’s romantic moments.

Throughout the collection, Bryson schools us in the ambiguities and complexities of male/female relationships in the twenty-first century. It’s an unblinking commentary on the tug-of-war of influences on men and women trying to survive life in the big city. Though the relationships sometimes falter, there are also stories presenting the opposite view. As a result, Bryson’s collection provides a satisfying, thought-provoking read about the search for love on the urban landscape.

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and teacher.

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