What Boys Like and Other Stories
by Amy Jones

Reviewed by Sara Harms

There was something about Amy Jones’s exceptional debut, What Boys Like and other stories that, as I was reading, kept me thinking: this is next-generation Alice Munro. It’s partly the way Jones presents the lives of girls and women to her readers – the portrayal is unsentimental, non-judging, unflinching. In Munro’s early stories, women often have to choose between staying or leaving small-town Ontario for the big city of Toronto or Vancouver. Jones’s women find themselves staying in small-town/city Maritimes or leaving for the big city for similar reasons. In both cases, the women who stay home get married, and the women who leave get an education. But here’s where the generational difference becomes interesting. Munro’s women typically make these choices to stay or leave in the unspoken context of second-wave feminism. Jones’s women, on the other hand, must negotiate these choices within the context of a post-punk, sex-positive cultural atmosphere ushered in by third-wave feminism.

I was especially intrigued by Jones’s portrayal of a certain kind of girl, the kind who knows “what boys like.” This kind of girl is promiscuous or a serial monogamist, damaged, irresistible to certain kinds of men. She would be a celebrated example of womanness in Dossie Easton and Catherine A. Liszt’s The Ethical Slut (1997), the widely consumed anthem for consensual polyamorous relationships. She is not judged negatively by today’s rules. I’ve met this kind of girl and though I defend her right to ethically slut around, I keep her at a distance. Amy Jones understands her complexities: she is fundamentally mysterious, ultimately unknowable to others – and, no matter why she is the way she is, she inevitably hurts people. One example is Emily of “All We Will Ever Be,” who fucks “too perfect. As though she learned about sex from watching porn. What would make a man crazy” (131). Another is Sephie, of “The People Who Love Her,” with whom men and women alike fall obsessively in love, and whose current relationship with a much older man is evidently unhealthy. At the story’s conclusion, Sephie’s best friend
Jill approaches an awareness of the mystery-bordering-on-danger of Sephie: “It suddenly feels as if the room is teeming with things I can’t see, thick in the air around us, and as usual, I am oblivious” (90). There is similarly a shroud of mystery around the “bad girl,” Leah (pronounced “Lay-a,” of course), of the opening story, “A Good Girl.” Jones is as loyal to representing the perspective of Leah’s spurned lover, Alex, as Alex is deceitful to his fiancée while obsessively pursuing Leah.

My favourite story of all is “One Last Thing.” It is narrated by Julia, who is in her late twenties. She is remembering the night, ten years earlier, when her younger sister, Joey, rebellious in all respects, disappeared. This story seems to be a key to the raison d’etre of the collection as a whole. I read and reread it and I thought, this story either has to be here or shouldn’t be included at all. It reminded me of the controversial inclusion of the story “Epilogue: The Photographer” in Alice Munro’s Lives of Girls and Women. Readers, critics, and even Munro herself wondered if the story was too much of a meditation on how and why Munro writes fiction. I make the comparison between “Epilogue” and “One Last Thing” because Julia articulates what is, to me, the question that drives Jones’s writing, the thing she is curious about throughout the collection:

Julia has questions, too – mainly: what is it about teenage girls? She was one herself, once, of course, but even then she couldn’t understand the changes she went through. What happens in their brains, at puberty, that makes them hate the people who love them, that makes them want to destroy their own perfect growing bodies, that makes them want to scream obscenities at the world? What part of this is hard-wired – little minds like mush, awash with some dangerous chemical cocktail, absorbing too much too soon? What part of it is society, that lets them grow up so quickly, without any clue where they are going, with its pressures and politics and mixed messages etc.? (53)

“What Boys Like” is but a beginning of a response to these questions.

Oh, and one last thing about “One Last Thing”: there are many gems within this key-to-the-collection story that I would already consider “vintage Amy Jones.” For starters, check out the perfect opening sentence, which exquisitely sets the scene, the mood, the cultural moment: “Julia’s little sister Joey disappeared on the same night Kurt Cobain died” (45). Another vintage technique Jones uses in this story, as she does in others, is to Capitalize the Inner-Discourse Thoughts of her Characters to Achieve Unique Voice. But my all-time favourite moment in this story demonstrates Jones’s knack for the
perfect detail, in the description of Julia’s high school boyfriend, Nicky: “dark and angry, his bony, indie-boy hands shaking on the steering wheel” (50). Tall, frail, intellectual Nicky could only be an attractive man in this day and age. I picture him as the muse of indie darling songstress Amy Millan’s song “Skinny Boy” from her solo album debut, *Honey From the Tombs*.

This collection won the Metcalf-Rooke Award, and judges John Metcalf and Leon Rooke comment that “there is something difficult to pin down but recognizably Amy Jones whenever it occurs.” Indeed, indeed. And hey, you know you’re onto something really good when you’re reminded of Munro at various turns. Jones gets the details right and knows when to honour the mysteries – a debut at its finest.

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