For the Love of Strangers
by Brenda Niskala

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

A 79-year-old woman is driving alone down a prairie highway when she encounters a fire burning on both sides of the road. Hesitant to drive through the smoke, she stops, sends a text-message to her family to say that she is delayed, and settles back to wait the fire out. While she waits, her mind wanders back to imagine herself in the same situation but at various earlier ages in her life, and to contemplate how she might have reacted at those times. This is the premise of the first story in the intriguing collection For the Love of Strangers, “Looking for Adventure.”

The 17 stories vary in length from 9 to 34 pages and are closely interconnected, such that they almost form a novel. The characters are basically the same throughout, though the viewpoints and voice frequently change. For the most part the stories are in chronological order, with time lapses of various lengths. They include events that take place over a period of more than twenty years, beginning about 1980 to the early part of this century, with flashbacks to still earlier times and one flash-forward to 2042. Sometimes the same incident, such as Kathy driving her car into a ravine, is remembered differently in two stories.

The main character is Kathy, with more than half the stories told from her point of view. In “Bird Bones” we see her at age ten on a holiday. In “Stag Line” she is in her thirties, with a fifteen-year-old daughter, Joy. Kathy has come to St. Peter’s Abbey for some quiet time, to mull over whether she should agree to Joy’s request to live with her father, Ron, for a while. While there, Kathy remembers when she herself was fifteen, and had just met Ron, a half-Native boy who had lived in seven foster homes.

“Between the Ditches” has several flashbacks. Joy is an infant and Kathy is finally taking her to meet her parents. She recalls her last visit home with the news that she was pregnant, and a still earlier one to introduce Ron, with both visits proving very
unsatisfactory. She also recalls the unhappy trip to visit Ron and inform him of her pregnancy.

A couple of stories are from the viewpoint of Cherise, a hard-working city lawyer who meets and falls for Ron when he comes for advice about visitation rights to Joy. Cherise’s business partner also comes into the picture, as does Kathy’s partner in her house-painting business, a former street woman who has become friends with Kathy.

Ron is the character who ties all the stories together. He is Kathy’s first boyfriend, Joy’s father, who comes for occasional visits and later Cherise’s live-in boyfriend for several years. But there is a lot we don’t learn about him. Though he’s a tough character, sometimes irresponsible and thoughtless, he’s also likable, and I would have liked a story near the end with more details about his later life. But we learn similarly little about Kathy’s later life, after Joy is in her mid teens.

I really enjoyed this novel-like collection. The reader gradually comes to know each of the characters in some detail, especially Kathy and Cherise. It’s interesting to see how each views the other, and how that gradually changes. I enjoyed the prairie settings, which are used for all the stories except one in which four of the characters take a holiday together in Britain.

There’s not much humour in this book, for most of the themes are of the serious type, including love and lost love, friendship, discrimination, aging and death. There are some effective descriptions, concise and perfect. For example: “the sun was dipping the entire sky into a paint box” (149) and “Kathy sees the northern lights wave their colours like tail feathers of magnificent peacocks” (111).

This is a book well worth reading. I hope to see more books by Brenda Niskala.

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.

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