

*Break Me*

by Tom Reynolds

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Reviewed by Bev Sandell Greenberg

There is more than meets the eye in this quirky tale by Tom Reynolds. Currently a southern Ontario resident, Reynolds has published short stories in several anthologies, and previously won the Canadian National Playwriting Contest. *Break Me* was the co-winner of the 2011 Ken Klonsky Novella Contest.

The story takes place over several months. At the outset, we meet Pierre, the thirty-nine-year-old protagonist, who lives in an unnamed French-speaking town. An only child whose mother has just died, he inherits a tidy sum as well as his childhood home. Pierre's reaction: "At last, my life can begin."

But it doesn't, not really. Pierre tries in vain to get a book of essays published and does little else. A self-proclaimed slacker, he amuses himself by spending copious amounts of time philosophizing on a variety of subjects, including love, pain, war, death, goodness and children.

The only question about death worth asking is whether it can be worse than life. If not, then why worry? If so, then how? Life never ends. I will forever be a bicycle riding, prescription drug-taking, jobless, unhappy, angry, solitary, God-blessed (I don't believe in God) empty man. (19)

Occasionally Pierre interacts with some of the adults and children in the neighbourhood, but the encounters always end abruptly due to Pierre's abysmal social skills. Consequently, he is treated as a pariah in the community.

The plot heats up when a few seemingly random events occur in the town. Pierre's dog suddenly dies, his next-door neighbour's home burns down, a young boy goes missing and a teenage girl – someone whom Pierre knows – is caught shoplifting.

This series of events greatly affects Pierre. His anti-social behaviour escalates and he starts to skulk around. He peers into a ladies' shop downtown and hides in a tree in order to spy on an attractive female neighbour. When another crisis occurs, members of the neighbourhood point to Pierre as the cause. He is then accused of perpetrating several crimes.

The novella's first-person narrative is written in frank, unadorned prose in the voice of Pierre. However, he is an unreliable narrator. Thus, as the story progresses, readers must reconsider details of the plot and connect the dots between them.

Reynolds's strong commitment to voice makes the story compelling. Accordingly, he strikes a balance between the menacing and occasionally endearing aspects of Pierre's character. This quality helps to maintain the attention of readers; it also heightens suspense by focusing on the unpredictable side of Pierre's character.

Readers will find Pierre eccentric and self-absorbed. Sadly, he is so narcissistic that it is hard initially to care much about what happens to him. In fact, he is like a weird neighbour that others would try to avoid.

Yet at the end of the story, we can't help but wonder how Pierre ended up in such a sad state. Did we miss something about Pierre at the beginning? Is he as innocent as he first appears?

Both nightmarish and absurdist, *Break Me* keeps us intrigued about Pierre's past and future. This is a promising debut for Reynolds as a fiction writer. ♣

Bev Sandell Greenberg is a Winnipeg writer and teacher.

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