Faded Love
by Robert N. Friedland

Reviewed by Dave Williamson

New-York-born Vancouver lawyer Robert N. Friedland has been, among other things, a U.S. sheriff, a U.S. Treasury Department investigator, a regional director of the Alberta Human Rights Commission, and a Victoria city councillor. In the past 30 years, he’s tried his hand at short fiction, and Faded Love is his first published collection.

Many of the stories draw on his background. The longest selection, a novella-length story with the rather cumbersome title “Graham and On-Ning, a Newspaper and a Cup of Tea,” features a character named Sam Victor who is regional director of the Alberta Human Rights Commission. He falls for a Malaya-born Chinese woman named On-Ning, who is regional director of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. When was the last time you read a story about two lovers with occupations like those?

Sam is Jewish and he has first-hand experience of the anti-Semitism rampant in Alberta. On-Ning puts up with her own share of racism. But the main thread of the story is the love affair, which is complicated by the fact that both Sam and On-Ning are married to other people. However, On-Ning’s Vancouver-based husband Graham and Sam’s wife Joanne both know about the attraction. In fact, On-Ning has a telephone conversation with Joanne that is positively cordial:

“I am On-Ning."
“Yes, I know. Sam’s told me about you.” . . .
On-Ning was curious. “What did he say?”
“He said you were sweet. That’s the highest compliment Sam can give a woman. He thinks a lot of you.”
“Are you angry, Joanne?”
“No. He needs a friend.” (114)

What constitutes true love for Sam and On-Ning is his ability to give her an orgasm, something her husband can’t do. We’re meant to see this as a tragic love story – perhaps
even a metaphor for the shoddy state of human rights in our world – but dialogue like the foregoing would seem to belie this. And the plot takes some unconvincing twists.

Friedland presents the story in short takes that bounce back and forth in time and are narrated from many different points of view. Unfortunately, shifting from one character’s viewpoint to another’s does not disclose anything new but merely repeats information.

The second-longest story is called “The Oil-Patch Sketches” and is again a series of short takes more or less linked by their connection to the oil industry – in the boardrooms and out on the rigs. Again widely varying in point of view, these “sketches” do not add up to a cohesive and satisfying whole.

“Sketch” is probably a good word for most of the other selections, some of which are only two pages in length. It is difficult to tell if, in publishing these sketches, author Friedland aspired to the minimalism of, say, Amy Hempel or Richard Brautigan. One feels that perhaps what we have here are earnest attempts at full-fledged stories made short by the amount of time available to a busy man.

At its best, Friedland’s prose can resemble that of a timeless fable. Elsewhere, it can be downright clunky, as in this line spoken by well-educated Sam Victor: “I could have rode with you and stood at the window . . .” (148)

The two best offerings are well written and come closer in scope and substance to the work of our better short-story practitioners.

One is “The Lost Knife.” In the telling of how he lost his cherished pocket knife and eventually had it returned, the protagonist reveals details of his whole life – in just six pages. A sample: “My mother had died during the time that I carried the knife. She refused to speak to me for two years before she died . . . I had lost the 1988 election while I carried the knife. What kind of luck was that?” (14)

The other fine story is “The Berlin Tie,” a funny, bittersweet yarn about a man’s tie, an exotic dancer and the power of a woman’s scent. It’s framed by the arrival of two small birds on the narrator’s balcony – he believes he’s seen them before because they resemble his ex-wife’s breasts.

Dave Williamson is a Winnipeg novelist.