

*What You Get at Home*

by Dora Dueck

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Reviewed by Donna Gamache

*What You Get at Home* is a collection of 15 very satisfying short stories by Winnipeg author Dora Dueck. They range in length from about seven to 14 pages, but several contain a considerable amount of backstory, and I sometimes felt there was enough material summarized or hinted at to deserve a complete novel about such an interesting character. Details are given, but – a sign of a good story – I wanted to know more. All the stories have female viewpoints, except for two which use two or three viewpoints, one or more of them male. The importance of family is an important theme in many of the selections.

Dora Dueck's background infuses all the stories, with most of the characters being of Mennonite heritage. The setting for many of them is Winnipeg, while others are set in the dry Chaco grasslands of Paraguay, and in Ukraine, and other parts of the former Soviet Union. These are not light, humorous stories, but generally contain a rather sombre, sometimes nostalgic, sometimes heartrending look at life.

In "Chopsticks," for example, the narrator, Patty, visits her father, suffering from dementia, in a personal care home. Hearing a couple of visiting children play "Chopsticks" brings back memories of herself and her brother playing the same tune, in a happier time.

In "The Rocking Chair," an old man dies at age 88, leaving very little in assets because he has given most of his savings to various charities. His three children – Harold, Norma, and Leonard – must divide up what remains, and the two brothers argue over which of them should get their father's old rocking chair.

"Crucifix on the Road to Gnadenheim" is a story of quiet despair, though the conclusion is more hopeful. Elinor has left her family, friends, and religion behind and moved to the other side of Paraguay to marry Ronald, not understanding "what it would cost to be a stranger" (58).

Perhaps the most poignant of the stories is "My Name Is Magdalena." A woman attends a writing class but writing a story brings back so many tragic memories – of moving from Ukraine to east of the Urals, then back again, and then, during World War II, having to flee with three young sons before the advancing Germans. This woman's heartbreaking story deserves a whole book.

Another memorable story is "Postponement," in which Shelley, who has just learned that she has cancer, decides to put off telling her husband, David, until a more appropriate time, because she remembers how he and everyone else had reacted years earlier when a different tragic event occurred.

The last seven stories of this book, linked together as "The Liese Stories," are vignette-type events in the life of Liese, who came from Paraguay more than thirty years ago, leaving behind her parents and friends to live with two of her mother's cousins in Winnipeg. In each of these stories, Liese reminisces about earlier events, not always in chronological order: a childhood incident where she spies on neighbouring American children as they play next door; the decision to come to Manitoba, unexpectedly encouraged to do so by her own mother, in order to prevent an unsuitable marriage; a surprising spell of homesickness for Paraguay, ten years after leaving it; and her first trip to Patricia Beach, when she and her boyfriend contemplate how their lives might have been different "if someone in your past had made a different decision" (129).

Dora Dueck is a skillful writer. I particularly enjoyed her descriptions and unique comparisons. For example, this description of Saskatchewan:

Today, the broad flat land as attractive to her as always, particularly green this year, and the sky very blue, loaded with the huge flat-bottomed clouds that appear in postcard images of the prairie, the endless asphalt coiling out ahead of them like a promise. (73)

Another fine example is in the Magdalena story: “I felt . . . the daylight fading to grey and brown. Darkness wrapped the summerhouse with its merciful shawl” (44).

Dueck has published two previous novels, *Under the Still Standing Sun* and *This Hidden Thing*. The latter book was the winner of the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award (2011), as well as being shortlisted for the Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction. I won't be surprised if this book receives a nomination, too. ♪

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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