

ISOLATION & SYMPATHY IN THE MIDWEST

Chad Simpson. *Tell Everyone I Said Hi*. University of Iowa Press, 2012.

The title piece from *Tell Everyone I Said Hi*, Chad Simpson's award-winning short story collection, evokes a blue-collar isolation that repeats throughout the book. The narrator, Lonnie, addresses the piece to his ex-girlfriend, almost like a protracted voicemail sent to show he's moving on while betraying the difficulty of his doing so, especially in light of her recent pregnancy and engagement to another man: "I wish I could hate this guy Ted. I really hope he doesn't call you his fiancée." Lonnie's lawn-care business ambitions are small, but the longing he feels for his better-educated ex remains large and complicated by his desire for her live up to her potential.

Lonnie is typical of the characters in *Tell Everyone*, who are midwesterners, working class, largely from rural areas and unable to escape their origins. Lawn-mowers, factory workers, ignored and abandoned children, retirees, their circumscribed lives focus the problems they encounter, their experiences solitary, distant from the crowd. When the lives of these characters do come into contact with one another, the sense of absence and disappointment magnifies, mak-

ing the few victories they're allowed all the more important. The foster father debating whether to sign adoption papers in light of his wife's unexpected pregnancy, the ten-year-old boy waiting on the porch of his crippled neighbor for his sister to come home (late) from a date, the widower and his suicidal teenage daughter still reeling from the loss of wife and mother, each character's loneliness and despair charges others throughout *Tell Everyone* with the energy of hope and determination, though not necessarily enough energy for an escape velocity.

Simpson crafts opportunities for empathy with his characters by highlighting their unassuming appraisal of their own problems. Of his daughter's suicide attempts in "Peloma", the narrator, Clem, says: "The first two were kind of pathetic attempts, but still." The understatement of calling his daughter's efforts to kill herself "pathetic" diminished with the qualifier "but still" leads readers to know this modest man is torn up inside, despite the faint whiff of humor in his words. The changing ratio of pathos and comedy in "Peloma" and in "Consent", the final piece of the collection, featuring the return of Clem and Peloma after several years have passed, signposts for readers when sympathetic sorrow is most warranted and when a grim chuckle would be more fit.

If any demurrals are to be levied

against *Tell Everyone* it would be aimed at the shorter pieces. Carving eighteen stories out of a slim 124-page volume denies some stories the space they need to create an individual impact. Yet what these slight character sketches lack individually they add to the whole, creating onion-skin layers adding nuance to the palette of sadness. Taken together with the more substantial pieces of the collection, they show Simpson to be an astute chronicler of a forsaken Midwest, populated with his hard-bitten characters.

—*R. Jess Lavolette*

