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 ***Knockemstiff (review)***

Dale Keiger

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviewed by:

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Dale Keiger (bio)

Donald Ray Pollock, *Knockemstiff* (Anchor, 2009), 224 pp.

In journalism, a story like that of Donald Ray Pollock sometimes is called a "readymade." A readymade is an 800-word feature for the lifestyle section of a newspaper, a story that requires only a couple of telephone calls, maybe lunch with the subject, then an hour or two devoted to writing a formulaic narrative, in this case about a loser who turned his life around and found redemption in art. A readymade nearly writes itself, which is its principal virtue to underpaid, overworked reporters. Pollock's story had all the essential elements. He quit drinking after his fourth stint in rehab, then somehow got into a graduate writing program. He studied his craft in part by laboriously typing out Cheever and Hemingway stories. His third wife stuck by him when he quit a good job at a paper mill to pursue writing. He had pictures of James Jones and John Berryman on the walls of his writing room. His agent called him "a hidden genius." The hidden genius was not really comfortable being the center of attention, but he responded to reporters with courtesy and genuine, humble gratitude for his sudden good fortune. And—get this—he had grown up in a town called Knockemstiff, Ohio, which presented him with the title of his first book. **[End Page 288]**

In a mass culture that would rather read about an author than read his work and seems to have an endless appetite for shallow tales of redemption, Pollock was perfect. When *Knockemstiff* appeared and began to attract favorable critical notice, reporters could write the author's story without breaking a sweat. The Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Esquire* all bit. NPR gave him more than eight minutes on *Weekend Edition*, the equivalent of a dozen pages in *Time* or *Newsweek*. For a book of short stories by a previously unknown scribbler, *Knockemstiff* got an unusual amount of attention.

The Donald Ray Pollock glimpsed in these press accounts seems like a smart, modest, admirable guy who deserves a break. I, for one, am rooting for him. Better that someone like him enjoys a prosperous literary career than a lying shyster like James Frey. But the stories in *Knockemstiff*—recently reissued in soft cover—don't have the lumber to

stand comparison to Raymond Carver, Flannery O'Connor, or Cormac McCarthy, all comparisons that have been made by the book's various promoters. Most of these tales have their moments—acutely observed scenes or quotable bits of vigorous language and mordant wit. But in all but one or two cases, they read like what they are: the work of a talented student who needs more practice. Pollock may be in his mid-50s, but as a writer he has just finished grad school. He brings to the task a distinctive voice and perspective, and he might have a fine book in him. *Knockemstiff* is not it.

The eighteen stories of the collection tend to be brief, linked by geography and some recurring characters who show up two or three times. Pollock has made a point of emphasizing that he was fond of the people in his hometown, that he loves his parents, and that the characters in *Knockemstiff* are not based on friends, neighbors, or kin. Good to hear, because as I read the book I compiled a little demographic chart of its population. I stopped at around twenty-five, and by then my list included one or, more likely, two murderers, a pair of gleefully incestuous siblings, seven drunks, five violent abusers, five dopers, and a retarded fat boy so desperate for attention he allows a couple of local punks to throw darts at his naked ass. The women are mostly beaten down, mentally dysfunctional, or foul mouthed, sometimes all three. The men are, with a few sad exceptions, drunken bullies or hapless fuck-ups. Their children already sense the futures that await them, but cannot bring themselves to leave town, either through a lack of resources or a lack of imagination. One who does make an escape, an abused...

males? The Allen Ginsberg of "Howl"—for his passion, rudeness, daring acts of self-exposure. George Gissing, for being a lifelong loser—and still writing a lot. H.G. Wells, for the late-life brainstorm that a lifetime of cheating might have hurtful his loyal and faithful wife; Randall Jarrell, out of empathy for the depression that eventually killed him. What does this set have that the first set lacks? Humility, honesty, a broad humanity—the ability (and the desire) to see the world without prejudice and give characters—real or make-believe—a fair shake. Is that too much to ask of a great artist? The great Russians didn't think so. Unfortunately, those writers (and James, Proust, Balzac, Dickens, etc.) are not on Gornick's list, which is a highly personal one. As a vocal member of second-wave feminism, perhaps Gornick finds it miraculous that she could appreciate such obviously less than feminist (if not to say, out and out sexist) men.

The personal nature of the list and the defense, laid out in eight, very-short chapters, make the book read like a late-night confession, part salvo, part lament, rather than a tight and tidy literary study or well-wrought polemic. The publisher, Boston Review, has turned out ten such books on different topics, ranging from race and nuclear disarmament to climate change and cinema. The editorial mandate is for books that are "accessible, short," and "take ideas seriously." They promise (not surprisingly) a commitment "to equality."

Fair enough. But growing one rich, well-argued essay might offer more of a mental harvest than the scattering of the same seed in eight tiny patches.

—Jean McGarry

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