

BOOK REVIEWS

Human Resources, BY JOSH GOLDFADEN
TIN HOUSE BOOKS, 2007

It has been said that Josh Goldfaden's short story collection *Human Resources* is "about" the human search for meaning. Of course, that is what this collection is about. The question of meaning in existence and how and where meaning can be found is an ongoing conversation to which most contemporary American authors contribute in some way. However, like all esteemed literary works, Goldfaden's stories contribute to the conversation in a fresh way and manage to stand apart from the other voices.

For one thing, the oddity of Goldfaden's characters lends fresh insight to this familiar dialogue. But then again, to say Goldfaden's characters are odd is slightly misleading. They both are and are not the people one expects to find living humbly in the world. They are, for example, a recent college grad, a retired photographer, a waitress, and a documentary filmmaker, to name a few. But they are also, respectively, a nanny to the kleptomaniac/pyromaniac child of poets; a stalker of a sort; a woman who believes she is fundamentally connected to Bruce Springsteen; and a woman who films births while her husband paints animals and people having sex while other animals or people watch. It is this seamless blending of us/not-us that makes this collection of characters endearing. Their circumstances are something familiar a reader can connect with, while still allowing for and providing the unlikely, the surprising, and even the outlandish.

Goldfaden's humor also contributes to the freshness of these tales, but Goldfaden offers no punchy one-liners, and no quick, easy, or predictable laughs. Keenly observed and biting in their satire, the stories in *Human Resources* offer a view of the world that puts on full display the absurdity of human existence. In "King of the Ferns" a writer contemplates leaving his wife because he believes she is too beautiful for him, and all the while his own dog plots his murder, and an egotistical potted plant sings its heart out in the living room. And in "Disorder Destroyers," a family shops and collects ever more stuff even as a team of experts carts away dumpsters full of "take-out menus, phone books, and rusty kitchen gadgets," empties out the "the kitty-litter room, the shoe room, the shoe box room" and the board game room, and arranges for the "removal of [the family's] corkscrew collection, handsaw set, their many caviar spoons, tapas pans, and fish poachers."

Perhaps unsurprising from a man whose employment history includes Jenny Craig stock-boy, ceiling fan salesman, car parker in Bavaria, and pizza-maker in Swabia comes a collection that explores the variety of forms the quest for meaning can take. Of course, book reviews should never give away the endings, so I'll simply say that the stories tend

to end just short of where one would expect them to end: interrupted masturbation, a circular trip that never comes full circle, and a potted plant yelling, apropos of nothing, "I am King of the Ferns! I am King of the Ferns! I am King of the Ferns!" The fact that these stories end in such a way that we are left anticipating one final statement speaks to the fact that the quest for meaning has no tidy or predictable ending. Life does not come complete with denouement. Sometimes the journey is simply over, and the journeyer is left clinging to the things that seem most important in that moment. That is not to say the stories don't end satisfactorily, for despite their open-endedness, the stories end just where they should.

The final story in the collection, "Nautical Intervention," follows a band of modern-day pirates, all of whom seem to be contending with moral dilemmas. This story has been optioned for film and Goldfaden is currently working on the screenplay adaptation. Odd as it may sound—and perhaps this is purely an issue of taste—a story about pirates turned pirate hunters is possibly the least surprising story in the collection. Johnny Depp and his band of misfits have now sailed across the silver screen three times, leaving little room for a pirate story, even a literary pirate story set in contemporary times, to grab the imagination in a brand new way.

All told, Goldfaden's collection adds to an existing dialogue about the quest for meaning in much the same way a drunk at a bar can interrupt a conversation with perfectly timed brilliance.

Elizabeth Moore

Voices of the Lost and Found BY DORENE O'BRIEN
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007

Voices...

In *Voices of the Lost and Found* Dorene O'Brien provides readers with a diverse, virtuoso performance of narrative voices. Each story in this exciting collection is told by a first person narrator who is most often also the protagonist. Additionally, they are all told in the present tense, lending the stories and their narrators an immediacy that compels and draws readers in. These narrators are distinct individuals, such as the narrator in "No Need to Ask," a story about the murder of a prominent local businessman. "But folks don't know about the time they strung up that ol' Cajun who'd gone heavy on the feed scale or when they tricked South into believing the law consecrated his sawed-off shotgun for it being illegal," the narrator says of two other characters. His redneck dialect and penchant for malapropism make the narrator (who goes unnamed as most of O'Brien's narrators in this collection do) practically jump off the page, as do his mixed feelings towards the victim, a man who went out of his way to make life hell for those around him. "Shit rolls downhill. Everyone knows that," he says. "There wasn't a day went by I didn't wish he was dead, or worse. Here's a lesson: keep your mouth shut."

O'Brien's use of dialect extends into the inner city as well. The narrator of "Way Past Taggin'" is a street-wise graffiti artist whose speech is peppered with slang. "I ain't no toy, not no more. I been writin' since I could tip a brush and a spray can, and now I can tag, piece, and get up better than Smak and Daze, and they call themselves the kings of Krylon...Listen, taggin's alright, especially for toys, but it's wac if you ain't got much else after five years." His voice provides the rhythm that drives the story along from moment to moment, exploring and exploiting the narrator's tragic life.

...of the Lost...

It's tragedy that each of O'Brien's narrators has had to suffer, yet none of her stories take place during tragedy. Each is told after the fact, when the damage has been done and the narrators are now numbered among the lost—not geographically lost, but psychically, ethically, and spiritually. O'Brien's stories explore all the ways in which a person can be lost. They tell us that everyone who experiences trauma or tragedy ultimately is. Even the narrator of "Retreat," who has suffered no violence or loss, is lost inside her sense of inadequacy. The narrator of "The Stalwart Support of the Obsessed" becomes lost within his own mind. And because the narrators are conscious of being Lost, each knows that somewhere along the way he or she stepped or was thrust off the path.

"My insight was sudden," says the narrator of "The Stalwart Support of the Obsessed," a story about a graduate English student who goes mad. "There had been hints, to be sure, but on that most memorable night I started to fully comprehend Bruce's writings, to decode what before had looked to me to be only gibberish. His text had cracked open my mind and I began to know what it must feel like to be Bruce." He is lost inside his academic theories and can't see past them to recognize that his

roommate has gone off the deep end. His refusal to recognize the truth ultimately compromises both their lives.

The narrator of "Crisis Line" is a man who puts in time at a hotline to make up for his past. "I was determined to do right: atone for the nasty things I'd done to my family, offset the attempted suicides, offer people the small things that I knew could save them. I wanted to balance the misery I'd inflicted with the misery I dispelled, not knowing how impossible this is." This point is brought home to him (and to us) all the more powerfully when his attempts to help only result in more death. The book asks, Is anyone who is lost every really found again?

...and Found.

Ultimately, yes. Some of O'Brien's narrators find their way, the ones who find a way to accept the world as it is and to accept the past as unchangeable. This acceptance doesn't mean that they are cured, healed miraculously, somehow whole. They will never be whole again, and that they accept this allows them to go on living. It is acceptance which allows the narrator of "Ovenbirds," who was kidnapped, raped, and tortured when she was sixteen, to ponder think, "But then there's this: What if I had never been abducted and turned out worse? Sick, or drug addicted, or suicidal. Maybe my abductor rescued me from a fate worse than abduction." It's not that she's grateful for what happened. She has simply accepted that there are far worse things that could have happened. She has gone on to lead a relatively normal life with a firefighter husband and daughter of her own. And while she admits that as a result of this experience, "Violence has consumed me, and I weave it into my thoughts as absently as one might yawn," she also admits, "I believe in the small things, the things I can live in one moment or hold in the small of my hand."

The final piece in the collection is "#12 Dagwood on Rye," which won the Bridport Prize in 2004. Its narrator is a man who has recently been hit by a car. He emerges from the accident completely unharmed (except for some bruises), and his first response is "Where's my sandwich?" As the months go by, his wife grows more and more concerned by his reaction to events. She says that he is "suspicious" of things and too serious. She forces him to seek psychological help. And yet the narrator does not feel different, doesn't feel more dour. If anything, he seems to feel a renewed vigor and appreciation for life's multifaceted ways. The story continues to navigate his perceived and unperceived neuroses before ending in the narrator's triumphal acceptance of himself and those around him. "When I leave I feel free, confident, emboldened and wiped clear by my anger. I feel strong, solid in a way that Dr. Michael and Jody may have hoped or simply never suspected I could be, and by the time I arrive home I am laughing the laugh of the validated, the vindicated, the victor." If we are able to accept ourselves completely, with all of our flaws and tragedies along with our virtues and victories, we can be found. We can go on living.

Daniel Ising

Why the Devil Chose New England for his Work BY JASON BROWN
OPEN CITY, 2007

The hot breath of the Devil streams over the back of the neck when reading each of the eleven stories in Jason Brown's latest collection. The sensory experience is reminiscent of being chased by one of Stephen King's most highly regarded accounts of Satan, in his short story "The Man in the Black Suit." King's demon, wearing an immaculate black suit, appears in the form of an ordinary man—aside from his burning orange eyes and mouth that opens "wider than humanly possible." Both Brown and King openly pay homage to Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence. King's story is set, as many of Brown's stories are, in the isolated woods of northern New England. The central difference between the two authors is that King's horror physically manifests itself in the supernatural, while the focal point of Brown's "crawlers" (to use Robert Louis Stevenson's term for gothic stories) aims at the habitually grisly internal landscapes of his characters.

Though there are no demons, beasts, or little gray men munching on hearts, the haunting qualities of Brown's stories are evoked through action in the physical world. In "She," a shotgun-bearing posse is formed to hunt down the young boyfriend of Natalie, a fickle girl who has become the central fixation of the majority of the town. There is wrenching suspense as the men form a circle around the boy, Dion, "the ends of their waving gun barrels like dark eyes." Yet, as is always the case with Brown, the darkness infusing all the physical action stems from the interior movements of his characters. Just hours before the posse sets out, Natalie realizes she doesn't even care for Dion, and any passion that might have given purpose to the night is lost. In the backseat of a borrowed car, with the entire town in a frenzy, and at the peak of her own physical pleasure, Natalie scoots away from Dion, her back against the far door, "her face scrunched up." She asks him to hold her, but already doesn't want him to touch her.

In another story, "The Lake," the ice cracks abruptly, and a skating man vanishes underwater. His body quickly convulsing, he manages to thrash up once, "his gloved fist only graz[ing] the ice before his limbs grew sluggish." Here again, the more disturbing moment is still to come from within. The point of view switches seamlessly to a young girl on the shore who, after a few moments of shock, goes for help. As she slips around on an icy trail, she eventually runs into an older boy, a friend of her brother's, whose affectionate look causes her to forget the man trapped in the lake.

While a similar exploration of the grotesque shades of the human psyche recurs throughout the loosely linked collection, and though these characters are generally caught in their worst moments, no character is ever written beyond the range of sympathy. Moreover, all this blackness and deviancy serves to enhance the few acts of valiancy that emerge—however shaded in failure their results may be.

In "Trees," the most mesmerizing and heartbreaking feat of the collection, a widow seems certain to fail to protect the acres of woods her family has watched over

for generations. Her nostalgia and goodwill hardly seem a match for the dim, selfish ambition of her young nephew. In the process, though, Lucy struggles with the decision to aid an abandoned, senile man (who she had a one-night affair with twenty years earlier), despite the public disgrace this might bring down on her. Some small measure of hope is felt when, of the gossiping ladies of her church group, Lucy proclaims to herself, "Damn them all."

In "A Fair Chance," an alcoholic who deserted his disfigured girlfriend after a car crash dreams of escape from his hometown and his poor reputation. Pete gets the chance to absolve himself of some of his past failures when his boss, his only friend, is stranded in an ice storm. Though the success of Pete's mission is left somewhat up in the air, the unexpected effort he makes is resonant.

Always willing to risk credibility without somehow ever truly straining it, Brown meticulously imagines the people of Vaughn, his fictional Maine town (for which he even includes a map). As for why the Devil chose New England, the map offers some small clue in the high concentration of the six churches present, which make up roughly a third of all the landmarks of Vaughn. While the characters in his collection often face grave dangers, Brown acknowledges a glimmer of potential for good, and masterfully confronts the subtle and implicit evils that rage around every corner and in every human heart.

Michael Place

Refresh, Refresh BY BENJAMIN PERCY
 GRAYWOLF, 2007

The world of Benjamin Percy's second collection *Refresh, Refresh* is filled with stories that are in alternating moments demonstrations of both the failure and triumph of humanity. His characters resist the "protagonist" label because so often there is nothing heroic or redemptive about what they accomplish over the course of a story. They kill family members, strangers, epically menacing animals; they generally interact with the world through a violence Percy depicts so sympathetically that our resistance is overwhelmed and we cannot help but understand that this horrible thing must be.

Every story has at its nucleus an event that is not only inherently disturbing, but is also unnerving in Percy's rendering of it. He digs the visceral and the provocative, and he welds precise descriptions of everyday horror to already amped-up narrative moments. This is not a cheap kind of escalation or stakes-raising, though. Peripheral violence—the refrigerator of thawed meat bleeding copiously to begin "The Caves in Oregon," the careful smearing of deer blood across a face to match a partial birthmark in "Somebody Is Going to Have to Pay for This," and the viciously detailed skinning and gutting of a deer carcass that is about to be used as a costume in the collection's title story – simply inhabits this world as casually and necessarily as furniture. It is an element of the real that, after reading a few of these stories, one begins to imagine is simply overlooked or underwritten by other writers.

But these are not stories in which Percy intends to ambush the reader with the lethal nature of this vision of small town central Oregon; the world announces itself as dangerous very early in every piece. Each of the first six stories in this collection begins in a scene of violence or death, the *least* jarring of which is a description of a future catastrophic meltdown of the Trojan Nuclear Reactor in "The Meltdown," ironically the most deadly of the six beginnings. Horror is not the end of the stories. It is the language in which they are told.

Unlike Cormac McCarthy or fellow Portland expatriate Chuck Palahniuk, Percy does not cast violence as an inherently cleansing or redemptive act. Of course, it sometimes has these qualities—Darren Townsend's vigilante roaming of the post-nuclear American Northwest in "The Meltdown" is, among other things, a kind of vicarious penance for his father's mistake—but it is more often simply a catalyst for plot action. Maybe "simply" is the wrong way to describe it. These moments of horror are anything but typical, expected, or simplistic. They are often, in fact, physical demonstrations of the complex and previously internal. These moments are flashpoints, either flaring into existence at the end of a story after a long and tortured compression, or blazing up at the beginning of the story, consuming everything that follows. In either model, for Percy's characters, violence is the thing that happens when one is forced to muster an expression of internal frustration that will inevitably be lost somewhere in the translation.

Perhaps this is part of the reason that Percy focuses this collection so exclusively upon the world of men. Every one of these stories, after all, has a man (sometimes only a boy with a too-early adulthood foisted upon him) as its central character. Not only is the action of these stories hyper-masculine—the trophy-gathering, brawling, revolver-wielding, raping, and avenging. Percy suggests that the inability to appropriately express a conflicted identity, such as that of Josh in “Refresh, Refresh” who despises and brutalizes the local army recruiter, but immediately enlists after beating the man to a pulp and abandoning him at the lip of a crater, is a particularly masculine dilemma. It is a confrontation between the demonstration of socially-defined (especially in the brutally frontierish and Spartan vision of inland Oregon that Percy presents) masculinity as dominion over surroundings—animals, children, women, forests, enemies, and prey—and an invariably frustrated attempt to control those things which refuse domination, namely death, loneliness, self, and the affection of others.

Though it might be an unfair burden to place upon Percy after only two story collections, there is a sense in which he is an inheritor of the stylistic tradition of writers like McCarthy and Bret Easton Ellis—horror of high literary merit. But unlike McCarthy, who invariably uses horror and violence as the messenger of a grand, symbolic, and often apocalyptic vision of the fate of mankind, or even someone more topically akin like Palahniuk, whose work too often reads like a shrill but entertaining screed against the perceived strictures of feminism and civility and is sometimes overwhelmed by his narrators’ verbal tics and neuroses, Percy’s horrific world seems somehow more meaningful.

Perhaps there is a palpable affection in his vision, a willingness to dig into the emotional subcutaneous of his characters and their flawed lives, not because it is a voyeuristic thrill, perpetuates a transparent agenda, or deciphers the fate of man, but because the process is mutually beneficial; it is a revelation of self as much as it is of protagonist. In his unflinching examination of the characters, Percy reveals the inextricable and ligamentous connection of the failed and horrific to the admirable and humane, and this tender sensibility gives the collection a tone that is as elegiac as it is brutally honest.

Ashby Tyler