



Nothing Like an Ocean: Stories (Kentucky Voices)

Jim Tomlinson

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Jim Tomlinson's previous book of short stories, *Things Kept, Things Left Behind*, won the prestigious Iowa Short Fiction Award and received enthusiastic reviews. The New York Times compared the strong sense of place in Tomlinson's writing to that found in the works of Flannery O'Connor and Alice Munro. The stories in his new collection, *Nothing Like An Ocean*, also reflect Tomlinson's awareness of place, revisiting the fictional town of Spivey, a community in rural Appalachia where the characters confront difficult circumstances and, with quiet dignity, try to do what is right. In the title story, Tomlinson explores themes of forgiveness and acceptance in the lives of two characters, Alton Wood, a high school math teacher isolated by grief, and his sister Fran, who is emotionally paralyzed by her part in a tragic death. The two take halting steps back into the world after Alton receives an anonymous invitation to a church singles dance. These themes also underlie "Angel, His Rabbit, and Kyle McKell," which tells of Dempsie's evening with two men -- her volatile boyfriend and the recently returned Iraq War amputee whose secret she has been keeping. Loss and the inevitability of change recur in Tomlinson's stories. In "Overburden," Ben, a man simultaneously contemplating AARP membership and impending fatherhood, travels with his wife, Sarah, back to eastern Kentucky to visit the oak tree that was essential to their courtship, only to find the site as barren and featureless as the moon, a casualty of mountaintop removal mining. "So Exotic" draws us into the worn environs of Rita's Huddle In Café, where the owner becomes the confidant of Quilla, a mousy bank teller who blossoms as the muse of an eccentric artist from Belarus. The eleven stories in *Nothing Like An Ocean* evoke a strong sense of small-town Kentucky life, finding humor in the residents' foibles while never diminishing their inner lives. Tomlinson's masterful fiction captures light and dark moments, moments that are foreign yet deeply familiar, as his characters seek redemption and sometimes find unexpected grace..

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