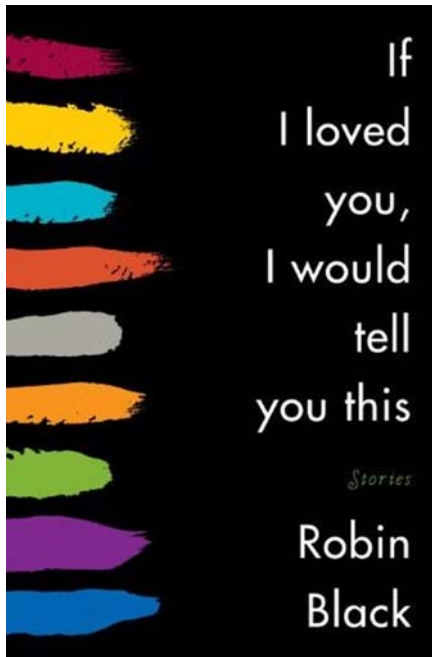


If I loved you, I would tell you this



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Robin Black

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This is very welcome addition to my short story collections shelf.

It has been said that, while in a novel there is a need for a plot and the development of characters, the short story need be no more than just that: a fragment of life, an interesting tale with a cameo of characters. Then you come across a writer like Robin Black and you learn that a short story can be a novel in miniature. Robin manages to populate a 28-page story ('The Guide') with five characters that you get to know, some of whom are developing in the short time-span of the story (a few hours) and she gives us rich context and back story. I found myself in this opening piece identifying with

one of the characters and barracking for another, finding one unsympathetic and another to be empathised with.

In an even shorter second story ('If I Loved You'), we are thrown into a situation involving neighbours, but we only see one side of the fence. The voice of the first-person narrator (also the central character) is at first apparently speculative, but is really giving a chilling account of a deteriorating situation. It gives a glimpse of the all-too-common isolation of suburban existence and the real and imaginary fences that are erected between people.

'Immortalizing John Parker' is almost a novella. Forty pages of beautiful writing, exploring the breakdown of relationships, their perpetuation on different levels, the attempt to freeze them in some way and doing without them. Clara is a portrait painter and divorced. Through her eyes and thoughts we are presented with a relationship that ended perhaps through choice, another that ended through sudden death and one that has endured for over fifty years but is slipping away. Through her art, Clara confronts how we see people and the assumptions we make about them. Again, the characters are totally believable.

In 'Harriett Elliott' Robin Black explores prepubescent girls' angst, cruelty and bullying, as well as the effects of families breaking up and tensions caused by differences in backgrounds and philosophies. A lot to pack into one short story. Oh, and also the love of ritual and revenge.

Only four stories into this collection and it is already a page-turner. Usually this only happens with a very good novel, but Robin Black is a wonderful storyteller and an excellent writer – a master of the art and the craft. There are few writers who can pack so much into a short story and not have it be bloated. Robin Black tells just enough and treats the reader as an intelligent participant in the storytelling process. This keeps her stories lean, yet gives them substance, gives her characters warmth, makes them totally believable and allows us to relate to them.

'Gaining Ground' is in a different style again – it is narrated in the first person in a rough/tough language. The thread through the whole fourteen pages is 'So what?' asked by the female narrator, quoting her ex-husband. She questions whether there is a connection between her father's death and the near-electrocution of her daughter. She thinks there is while her ex would insist the

opposite. This forms a spine throughout the story, with musings arising from this (including her meditations on her ex) forming the vertebrae and ribs.

“There shouldn’t have been mice in late June. Not inside.” So begins ‘Tableau Vivant’. It’s a rollicking narrative of an older woman, describing her life by describing the cottage in the country she and her ailing, older husband have moved to, as a metaphor for what her life has come to. It is a rich account told with economy. For instance: “She found the scarf in the closet of the large guest room where her daughter, Brooke, was to stay that night.” Many writers would have used a whole paragraph to give the reader that much information. Through Brooke’s visit we find out a whole lot more about her mother. The title of the story describes both its style and its contents.

‘Pine’ is another of Robin Black’s ventures into unveiling family and outside relationships: single mother with teen daughter, possible new man in her life, other ‘soccer mums’. Like all the other stories in this book, it is finely observed and beautifully written. Much is said by being left unsaid. This story also explores belonging and being on the outer, and the cruelty than can mask caring.

In the following story, ‘A land where you used to live’, we are again taken on a journey – physically and emotionally. It is about the perceived failure of parenting, loss, attempted redemption and reconciliation and how a new relationship may encourage a person to try and mend others. It is also about the endurance of love and its manifestation in unexpected ways.

The penultimate story is short and tight. ‘... Divorced, Beheaded, Survived’, like the final, ‘The History of the World’, deals with siblings and death and how people deal with the latter. Death can be a stain on lives it touches, it can be a release and it can leave people utterly alone. ‘The History of the World’ is long for a short story and, like some of the others in this collection, is divided into what would be chapters in a novel. It reads like a novel – character development, back story, issues of relationship, minor characters, life-changing events.

It seems that Robin Black appears to have not published any novels, which is a pity, because they would be rich experiences for the reader, as all of these stories are. They are not just stories simply told; they are multi-layered, colourful, three-dimensional expositions of life, in all its beauty and terror, love and hate, shame, regret and redemption. They appeal because they have integrity. These are not ‘Once upon a time ...’ stories. They are immediate and fresh. It’s as if the author has created ten rooms and you can open any door and walk straight into the middle of an unfolding scene.