

Surviving with Hope

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Survival Rates by Mary Clyde (Athens: University of Georgia U.P., 1999) 161 pp., \$24.95.

MARY CLYDE'S SHORT STORY COLLECTION, *Survival Rates*, won the Flannery O'Connor award for short fiction last year. Two other Mormon story writers in the past six years have achieved the same honor: Paul Rawlins, whose *No Lie Like Love* won the award in 1994, and Darrell Spencer, whose *Caution: Men in Trees* won the award this year and will be published next year. While these collections are each unique, they have in common their careful devotion to voice, the unique language and vision of their characters. Each story entertains a different stranger, as Bruce Jorgensen has suggested good readers and writers do¹; they all produce a deep and abiding empathy for the plight of the people in the stories.

Clyde's stories are especially generous. Her grace toward her characters begins with her carefully wrought lines, which are as tight as a Pope couplet, as ironic as Jane Austen, and as playful and carefully parsed as stand up comedy: "A little yoga and a lot of money have made her serene."² "Surely divorce is the most public of failures—untidy, personal, inevita-

ble—a hair clog in a bathroom sink."³ "He thought he should tell her more about how his mother's death had changed everything, as the first gunshot turns a battle scene into a battle."⁴ "We trust you," his parents said over and over, until Todd wanted to scream, "Please don't. I think I might be a maniac."⁵ Line by line she forces her characters against the limitations of their own vision. Her stories contain household tragedy rather than epic tensions forged against a pervasive myth, the kind of structure that produces heroes. The result is humanist-Christian empathy for those who—as she said in a recent interview—are, like most of us, imperfect people:

I've never been able to create a villain because I don't understand villains. I feel that I understand people like me, who mean well, yet messed up on the way. The other reason I never create villains is that I don't have a real fondness for them. I have a fondness for my characters—a certain admiration for them in that they struggle through life, indeed finding some way to survive.⁶

Because they are survivors, her characters are pitiable but not pitied.

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1. "To Tell and Hear Stories: Let the Stranger Say," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 40-50.
 2. Mary Clyde, *Survival Rates* (Athens: University of Georgia U.P., 1999), 1.
 3. *Ibid.*, 56.
 4. *Ibid.*, 73.
 5. *Ibid.*, 118.
 6. Mary Clyde, interview by author, tape recording, Provo, Utah, 10 Sept 1999.

They are in troublesome circumstances—a girl whose nose was bitten off by a dog, a man whose mother is dying, two young women who have had illeostomies, a woman who has chosen security over romance in marriage, an infant whose burial urn is abandoned roadside, a divorced wife who can't explain to her son why she can't forgive his father, a young man so petrified of people that he hides in his girlfriend's closet from her family, a man whose cancer might break up his marriage, a high school graduate who doesn't know what he's going to do with his life, a mother whose daughter has just lost her boyfriend, a girl who watched her young women's leader die in a fall from a ski lift.

Of course, my typifying the stories this way—as tragic situations—is a distortion, exactly the order of condescension Clyde avoids. The magic, or I might say Christianity, of her fiction is that the characters earn respect as we consider their *responses* to these difficult experiences. As the dust jacket says, "Mary Clyde's stories explore not so much what has happened already but what happens next." What do we make of the misfortunes of life? She describes the tragedies, large and small, surviving which we endure.

What happens is that her characters encounter moments when they must discover whether they measure up. For one character, this means facing his mother's death with charity for her.

Dear," [his mother had] said, "I'm very ill. It's t-e-r-m-i-n-a-l." And he'd thought, actually prayed, *Please let me be good. This time. Let me rise to this and do the right thing.* But he also thought—and he was ashamed to

admit it—*why did she have to spell it?* (2)

Clyde invites us to courteously consider his plight. Another character says, after dropping herself from the stalled ski lift which killed her youth leader, ". . . in jumping we saved ourselves. In the action, we exercised an option; we made an exclamation. We said, *We have survived.*" In our interview, Clyde said:

I'm interested not only in the pure yes-no of being alive; I'm interested in the dynamics of survival. And what it means. To that character [the one who jumped to save herself from her leader's fate] it meant that while she had suffered something incredible and difficult, she had some agency in it. She had been able to say, we did this and we said, "We're alive." A lot of my stories come down to people grappling with the issue of what kind of life survival means. . . . Part of the reason is that the action itself in many cases is just forced on us. You know, we don't have a lot of say in our thyroid cancer or illeostomy or sometimes in our divorce. But what we start to have a say in is indeed what happens to us.⁷

In "Howard Johnson's House" the protagonist replaced a child's dog-bitten nose with one that is more comely than the one she inherited at birth. The mother may sue him because she wants her child to have the same face she had before the accident. The surgeon faces a contemporary moral/ethical dilemma. His wife, Beth, advises him to refer the case to another doctor.

7. Ibid.

"But suddenly he can't stand to hear it, can't stand to think what this says about Beth—that a certain dispassionate objectivity would allow her to abandon the girl; that her decisions can be based on mere expediency."⁸ Not giving another human careful consideration is unbearable to all of Clyde's narrators. Her narrative voice makes a marriage between fashionable, edgy play with language and old-fashioned respect for others, a courtesy that runs so deep that it transforms the reader.

Clyde's Mormon characters—mothers and daughters, sons and fathers—are both familiar and universal; they fit neither national stereotypes (pinch-faced polygamists, conflicted gay men, radical conservatives, and other types grabbed off the rack ready-made) nor regional stereotypes (faithful pioneers, pious helpmates, and children with cute afflictions). In Clyde's stories the moral act is seeing beyond stereotype. She ignores (as if it were a tiny crack) the current chasm which divides much of Mormon writing into two camps—that which is ardently faithful and that which is ardently critical; both radicalize at the expense of story. Her characters and their situations are more important to her than narrow politics.

In "Victor's Funeral Urn," a woman is reproached by her son, who wishes she could forgive his father's adultery, the adultery for which she divorced him. "Max glimpsed behind the *Wizard of Oz* curtain—behind the booming voice demanding bedroom cleaning and teeth brushing—and saw the puny

reality of me. And how could he hide his disappointment? How could he pretend anything would ever be the same?"⁹ The counterpoint story is that the mother finds a baby's funeral urn at roadside and brings it home. How was something so important lost? Her son is terrified by what this means, that the ashes of an infant might *not* be missed. He says, "'But you'd stop and get it.' Then I see it occur to him it could fall out without someone noticing. 'You'd find it. Wouldn't you? . . . I mean, you'd get it back?'"¹⁰ In that moment of pausing in the face of tragedy, when we consider a moral dilemma carefully with the characters, a kind of grace enters in. Clyde says of her fictional creations,

So I think I have the impulse to embrace them, but I don't feel sorry for them. Even the little girl with the bitten off nose—there's the moment she makes that connection with the doctor and I think, "Oh, she's going to make it." I hope good things for them. . . . I remember when I wrote *Farming Butterflies*, there that kid stood before me, doing that weird thing with his levis [circling his thumb on the brass rivets], and I thought, "I hope he's going to be okay."¹¹

These stories give liberally to the extent that charity becomes an almost physical quality—a margin of chivalry or compassion for another, thus avoiding the small-minded bickering to which we often descend in conversation and fiction.

8. Clyde, *Survival Rates*, 11.

9. *Ibid.*, 55.

10. *Ibid.*, 63.

11. Clyde, interview with author.

So reading, we learn empathy. As one of the victims says at the end of a story, "There is tenderness there, and yes, warmth."¹² But no sentimentality. Her genuine respect for these survivors allows for no teary-eyed and heart-wrenching pity (the grease which makes much Mormon fiction work) for the cancer victims, the divorcees, or those on the brink of leaping into danger.

Always at the edge of vision is the "pale, hardscrabble desert,"¹³ another corrective to sentimentality. One character says, "He feels daring living here, where the landscape doesn't want to be inhabited and seems to wait patiently for him—for all of them—to go."¹⁴ Javelinas and other creatures of the desert slip along the edge of her stories, as if to remind us that there is a whole universe of "other," a setting against which our paltry (but ironically essential) human decisions are made. The physical setting reminds us that tragedy is as close as a rattlesnake in a bush at the edge of a groomed lawn. In the title story a man finally admits his cancer might kill him: "'That's right,' she said. 'You might

die.' He thinks she might stay, now that he has admitted defeat. But his loss is so absolute he blinks repeatedly, sensing he has given away something bigger than anything he knew he owned."¹⁵ Clyde says of this piece:

The story is that he does not look at the cancer as hopeless—kind of brushes it off. And it's his wife that insists. To me the poignant moment is when he confesses he could die and that he realizes that he's given up more than he knew he had—he's given up the hope. Many of the stories come down to that hope.¹⁶

Clyde, and these other writers, have helped me better understand the question, "How does our charity manifest itself in literature?" Not only through the surface detail, the diction of Mormonism—home teaching, baptism for the dead, eternal progression—but rather through deep compassion for people, even if they are only fictional creations. This is close to the compassion Christ demonstrates for each of us and which should be the cornerstone of any Mormon aesthetic.

12. Clyde, *Survival Rates*, 106.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

15. *Ibid.*, 106.

16. Clyde, interview with author.