

Book Reviews

The Angels of Our Better Beasts. By Jerome Stueart. Peterborough: Chizine Publications, 2016. 234 pages.

Reviewed by Heather Aruffo

“There are strange things done in the midnight sun,” begins Robert Service’s famous poem of loyalty, death, and absurdity in the Yukon Territory, “The Cremation of Sam McGee.” It is in this vein that Jerome Stueart crafts his story collection, *The Angels of our Better Beasts*, where the stories verge into the uncanny, flirting gracefully, if not playfully, with the boundaries of genre and absurdity while still retaining their focus on the deeply human desires and needs of their characters. The fifteen stories in the book—ranging from the flash piece “Et tu Bruté” where a singing gorilla misses his owner’s ex-boyfriend, to the novelette “Heartbreak, Gospel, Shotgun, Fiddle, Werewolf, Chorus: Bluegrass” where a werewolf banjo player can only be contained by a perfect fiddle rendition of “Wondrous Love”—are as diverse in their characters as they are in their settings, making for an unexpected and at times delightful read. The stories are well drawn, eschewing many of the canned tropes of science fiction and fantasy to create worlds and situations that are wholly original and unexpected.

Stueart’s irreverent humour is one of the strengths in the collection, showing itself through the set-ups of his stories as much as in his prose. The first story in the collection, “Sam McGee Argues with His Box of Authentic Ashes,” plays with the form of the original poem and presents the question of whether the real Sam McGee (from Ontario, rather than Tennessee) should claim to be the original. “Bear with Me,” a later story, describes a woman who goes to the Yukon to meet a man she has met online, only to discover that he transforms into a bear at night. Lemmings do research to discover what their newest predator will be in “Lemmings in the Third Year” and cause their own destruction by becoming “paranoid by their own data” (16). Stueart’s stories draw from pop culture, mocking them with their strange settings, while still raising interesting implications and questions by the complexity he gives his characters.

There are times, however, when Stueart relies too heavily on fabulist association, resulting in moments and worlds that are neither fully realized nor explicitly developed. In "How Magnificent is the Universal Donor," what could have been an interesting medical thriller about a man trying to save his husband is muddled by the presence of the nonsensical "Beijing Blood Disease" that can only be treated by blood transfusion from a patient who is "chemical free." The story is at its best, a poorly researched work of science fiction and at its worst, downright insulting to anyone who has ever been given medical treatment, limiting the passionately drawn story between the two characters and the interesting ideas Stueart raises about medical ethics towards the end. Other stories in the collection suffer similar weaknesses. The story "Heartbreak, Gospel, Shotgun, Fiddle, Werewolf, Chorus: Bluegrass" is fascinating, but there are moments where its narrative arc is weakened by its length and lack of clarity as to what is happening, particularly in its twist ending where a character declares "you are all werewolves" (69) without sufficient buildup to the twist, thematically or conceptually.

These flaws, however, do not overshadow the many pleasures of this collection, particularly the deeply drawn characters that Stueart presents. There are deeply human connections present in the stories, primarily between lovers. Despite the strange circumstances in which his characters are placed, they still emerge triumphant, bolstered by the strength of their relationships to each other. Perhaps it is this in Stueart's book that truly captures the heart of the North. Despite the North's appearance in only a handful of stories, Stueart manages to capture the spirit of camaraderie in the face of the strange and the inhuman that so aptly captures what the best of northern living can be.

Heather Aruffo, University of Alaska Fairbanks