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PARK CITY: New and Selected Stories

By Ann Beattie

Alfred A. Knopf. 496 pp.

Like a boxed set of Miles Davis CDs, Ann Beattie's offering of new and selected stories is both superb in itself and an essential piece of history.

Begin on page 137, after the eight new stories, and as you move through selected work from Beattie's previous five collections, then back for the new tales, you trace the evolution of one of our era's most vital masters of the short form.

Four stories from *Distortions* (1976) and six from *Secrets and Surprises* (1978) reflect the themes and early style that thrust upon Beattie a celebrity that might have ruined a weaker writer, and the oppressive title of spokesperson for her generation.

To Lennon's question, "All the lonely people, where do they all come from?" the answer seemed, "From Ann Beattie stories." Here are the drifting, loveless seventies survivors whose unfulfilled sixties hope and hedonism left them isolate. There's 32-year-old Cynthia of "Wolf Dreams," entering her third marriage, still without a clue. She "even takes half a sleeping pill with her lunch, and that keeps her calm." But she's fallen asleep at the wheel of her own life, so that her father seems right: "You are never going to find true happiness when you don't spend any time thinking between one husband and the next."

These anguished early Beattie men and women fail to see the role they play in their own misery, like the sensitively observed couple in "Vermont" who split and recombine with others, yet never quite know what they want or value what they have. Lenore, in "Weekend," stays with a 55-year-old unemployed professor who patronizes and demeans her while carrying on with former students, which Lenore tolerates to preserve what little she has.

As much as their matter, their form gave these stories prominence, an elegant reportorial coolness arising from the overcharged nerves of the times, a spare minimalism descending from Chekhov and Hemingway that became an artless vacuity in Beattie's less gifted imitators. As with Muhammad Ali, a host of callow successors aped her style but lacked her gifts. Hemingway, who fervently harbored a lifelong crush on himself, once lauded his "Clean, Well-Lighted Place" by saying that there he "was able to leave out almost everything." So was Beattie, providing bare essentials which made the full picture take shape in the reader's imagination. Like Picasso, able to conjure a nude's back from just three lines, only a consummate artist can offer those essentials and no more. Beattie could, Carver could, few others.

Her later collections, *The Burning House* (1982), *Where You'll Find Me* (1986) and *What Was Mine* (1991), displayed a constant growth frustrating to those who wanted

to arrest Beattie in time. Increasingly, her characters can recognize the byways where their path to happiness runs off-course. Many still fear emotional commitment but can seek friends like Ruth in "Learning to Fall," who "will reach out and touch you to let you know she is listening when you talk," and who help them learn: "What will happen can't be stopped. Aim for grace." Their grief can now have distinct cause, like the couple in "In the White Night" who've lost their daughter to leukemia. If they remain loveless, like sensitive Christine of the exquisitely written "In Amalfi," they have a better understanding of why. As if to explain many early Beattie characters, the narrator of "Jacklighting" suspects "that if the birds could talk, they'd say that they didn't enjoy flying."

More and more, the stories contain children as a focus of intimacy and source of self-awareness. The tender "What Was Mine" presents briefly the ideal loving stepfather that Beattie fully fleshed out in her novel *Picturing Will*. Beattie has uncanny insight into paternal love, and, like Carol Shields and Anne Tyler, genuinely *likes* men.

The style, too, evolved, as Beattie's photographic eye began capturing the heart of a story in the perfect image, like Milo in "The Cinderella Waltz" who keeps others at distance by assuming a position above them. In the story's final line we see him "in a glass elevator...going up and up, with the people below getting smaller and smaller, until they disappear." The often-anthologized "Janus" centers entirely around a "perfect" bowl a real estate agent received from a lover who knew she couldn't seize what would make her happy, and is now all she has left of him.

The new stories show further ripening. While not all of equal freshness, the best of them display still greater technical mastery wedded to a deepening potential for affirmation. Beattie's tragic sense of life has not disappeared but doubled, as we now see its dimensions mirrored in a possibility for joy, a mood presaged in the rapturous epiphany ending 1991's "Imagine a Day At the End of Your Life."

"The Four-Night Fight" presents a bemused look at the short break in contentment of a married couple. The husband has his quirks, the wife her frustrations, but, after a few days' release of pressure, the domestic bond re-adheres, stronger for the breach.

Yet Beattie is no Pollyanna. The lengthy, amusing yet unsettling "Park City" provides a highly readable immersion in where her parent/child theme stands now. A 14-year-old explains her gregariousness: "It come from being self-involved.... What I'm really doing is projecting my anxiety." And she's right.

"Park City," set in a Utah resort where Yuppies buy overpriced Oreos dipped in dark chocolate, reflects not only Beattie's perpetual knack for finding the perfect detail but a command of capturing place, as does "The Siamese Twins Go Snorkeling" with its three-quarter-time evocation of Key West.

Best, perhaps, is "Cosmos." A young teacher constructs exaggerated personal stories about her stepson for her Japanese students, all irony and pity lost in the cultural

translation. As this wry, large-hearted story unfolds, Beattie weaves a remarkable network of unobtrusive symbols to show how all our lives are filled with disorder, some innocent, some hurtful. But, when seen with compassionate eyes, our clutter can be accepted by others as an imperfect but lovable whole.

The constant evolution of technique and empathic humanity of these new stories make clear that the mature Beattie is even better than the famous Beattie.