

Cultural Daily

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Book Review: *Life—Orange to Pear* by John Brantingham

Kendall Johnson · Wednesday, November 25th, 2020

Once a wise and powerful wizard pulled a small but brilliant gem out of a leather pouch and laid it on the table before a cluster of his closest friends. As they leaned over and and peered into the depths of the tiny gemstone, the mysteries and terrors of the universe were revealed. Such is John Brantingham's latest collection of flash stories, *Life—Orange to Pear*, one of the first publications of Bamboo Dart Press, a new collaborative project by Pelekinesis and Shrimper Records.

A sustained read of John Brantingham is a return to all that is important. Whether it is a tramp through the Sierra Nevada, a day on streets of the Inland Empire, or a dance through the clouded history of sunny California, you'll be guided through stories of love, honesty, possibility, perhaps most frightening, parenting.

Life—Orange to Pear follows a set of 20 telling interchanges between the protagonist and his daughter, Cyndi, at various ages, as both negotiate the delights and pitfalls of growing up, trying to understand others, coming of age, sex, love, and the coming end of this miracle and curse called living. Whether you see the unfolding panorama as dialogue between Father and Daughter, between them and Mom, between each of us and our inner selves, or between disparate cultures colliding, you will find much of value revealed.

The twenty stories follow a nearly-fifty year relationship between Cyndi and her father, written from his point of view, beginning with him showing four year old Cyndi how to make everything good by immersing herself in the smell and taste of an orange. The collection ends with the father on his death bed with Cyndi next to him, now fifty, reminding him how to lose himself in the taste and texture of a pear. In between, the stories explore themes of death, fear, vulnerability, religion, the tooth fairy, sex, deception, and love. The basics of living.

In an early story, Cyndi is seven and wrestling with her beliefs in Santa. Her parents had been drinking when they wrapped ill-chosen gifts, giggles at the time but confusion at the unwrapping. Cyndi's child theology is undermined, worrying about Santa-issues, his existence and judgement. In another, Cyndi is older. Her father righteously storms out of a party over an ideological issue, his indignation somewhat compromised by self-interests. He wants to impress Cyndi and get his wife away from the hosts advances. At the same time he doesn't want to leave the hosts expensive booze. At every step, Brantingham manages the realism of mixed motives, conflict, and the impossible weight of responsible parenting borne by imperfect parents.

Fathers of teen age daughters find boys problematic. In one of the stories, Cyndi is twelve, and becoming aware of her own sexuality. Her father questions his own positions and fatherly

responsibilities. He knows Cyndi is unlikely to trust him much longer, and he certainly doesn't trust his own judgement nor motives. In a later story, when she is fourteen, father watches Cyndi coming out of school with a boy, just as an earthquake happens to hit. He watches the two of them hold on to each other in the excitement, and he relives the earthquake of meeting her mother.

The hidden yet palpable presence of Cyndi's mother is felt all along. She is clearer in her own attitudes and beliefs than her husband. Negotiating that difference on behalf of his daughter is a major theme in these stories, for him, and for all of us.

Brantingham is an innovative writer, his form and structure carry us to an understanding of those things hardest to understand. Tight, concrete descriptions of everyday images point to truths far beyond the stated scene. John doesn't preach; he instead leaves the heavy lifting to the reader. In his hands the mundane is seen to be the wonderment it is. From "Can We Come Out Now":

You want this last year to be like your probably false memory of your first years, just you with a familial closeness that you've been craving your whole life since.

So pull up a chair—or, if you're in Sequoia, or another of those Brantingham-esque places, pull up a camp stool or log—and fasten your seat belt. Prepare to immerse yourself into your own inner/nature/drama about the stuff that truly matters.



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