

READER'S GUIDE

Home Schooling by Carol Windley



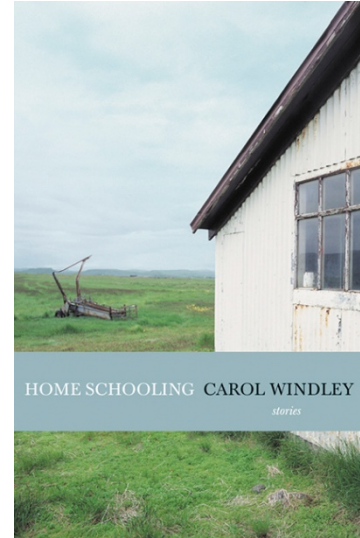
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INTRODUCING *Home Schooling*

Home Schooling was nominated for the 2006 Scotiabank Giller Prize and won the 2007 Ethel Wilson Prize for Fiction.

In this long-awaited and much-anticipated second collection of stories, Carol Windley captures the shimmering, mutable light of the U.S. Pacific Northwest and Vancouver Island, where a diverse and unforgettable group of characters confronts sorrows and triumphs.

In "What Saffi Knows," the eponymous narrator, now a parent, remembers a summer when a boy called Eugene Dexter disappeared, leaving his blue cotton jacket and his treasured Marvel comics at the edge of an empty field. She recalls the turmoil of her feelings as she searched for language to make her family understand the horrific and strange truth: their neighbour, Arthur Daisy, had a bird-boy locked in his basement.



In the title story, Annabel struggles with her desire to escape life at Miramonte, the alternative private school her father founded on an isolated island. As she matures, Annabel begins to understand that she is not the only member of her family trapped by her father's vision. She witnesses her mother's attempt to come to terms with the death of one of the school's pupils and her sister Sophie's surprising ability to take action, while Annabel seems unable to free herself from doubt and uncertainty.

In "Family in Black," Nadia's mother has left Nadia's father to marry Nolan Ganz, an enigmatic older man who owns a logging company that is tearing down forests on Vancouver Island. Nadia learns that people can be as changeable and, at times, as unreliable and indifferent as the landscape, and that happiness often depends on unlikely alliances.

"Sand and Frost" deals with a young girl confronting a violent family tragedy, while in "The Reading Elvis," Graham finds himself lost in a world of changing multiplicity, as figures from the present and the past appear and disappear, mischievously illustrating, for his benefit, Nietzsche's Law of Eternal Return.

In these stories that read like short novels, Windley has created her characters through finely rendered descriptions and both familiar and unfamiliar situations that readers wholeheartedly empathize with.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Memory

A major theme in the stories is that of recollection, with many of the characters remembering past incidents in their lives. Sometimes these are quiet moments, but they are often life-altering events. Sometimes, they question the accuracy of their memories. In "The Joy of Life," Alex has created a memory of her friend – whose husband and child she has taken on – believing she is still alive in Wales, instead of remembering she had really died in a snowstorm.

Isolation

Isolation is another strong theme in this collection. The characters are, in some cases, geographically isolated, but, more importantly, they are isolated emotionally from their families, and sometimes from themselves. In “Sand and Frost,” Lydia thinks, “How strange ... that each person was made up of innumerable past selves, and these selves were hidden and unreachable.” The isolation of the self is often reflected in the landscapes both physically and metaphorically; the characters in “Home Schooling” are isolated in both senses.

Place and Placelessness

Several characters in the collection have a longing for a place that isn’t their home. In “Reading Elvis,” Graham notes that this longing seems to emerge from a “desperate yearning for an unknown landscape, a place where it is possible to begin over and just maybe, with luck, get it right this time and thus avoid being irredeemably damaged by the simple process of living and making choices.” Alex longs for (and gets) the home of her best friend in “The Joy of Life.”

Distance

In “Children’s Games,” Marisa struggles to remain at a distance from her surroundings — both physically and emotionally. She says that she changed her name “for distance.” The family in “Home Schooling” is distanced geographically from the broader society. In “Family in Black,” the distance between Nadia and her mother and step-father overwhelm her. Sometimes the distance is metaphorical, sometimes it is geographical. Sometimes the distance is constructed by the characters themselves, out of choice or necessity. At other times, they feel themselves to be unwilling victims of distance. It is a construct present in almost every story.

Q&A WITH CAROL WINDLEY

1. Why did you choose “Home Schooling” as the title story?

Each story is concerned with the lives of different characters, yet all the stories in the collection share a preoccupation with the family as the setting in which we learn what it means to be human. It’s those early lessons, or at least what we understand of them, that we take into the rest of our lives. This is made most explicit in the title story, “Home Schooling.” Here, the parents, Harold and Nori, not only home-school their own daughters, but attempt to apply a similar educational style at their small, private school on an isolated island. Harold believes his method and his theories will turn his daughters into prodigies and his students into well-adjusted, gifted individuals, but the complexities of personality and circumstance undermine his best intentions, which is what happens, of course, even in the happiest families.

2. How did the collection of stories evolve?

When I re-read the earliest of these stories, “The Joy of Life,” a year or so after it was first published, I became intrigued with the character of four-year-old Lauren. She exists slightly off-stage, as far as the events in the story go, and yet in her quiet, unobtrusive way, she’s an essential witness to her mother’s stay at an artist’s colony in Wales in 1957. Her ability to observe and, later, as an adult, to accept her mother’s passionate commitment to art and to life, without resentment or condemnation, interested me a lot, and so did developing a child as a character. I wanted to continue to explore in fiction the way in which family members interact and teach each other, often unintentionally, important lessons about survival and tolerance, hope and trust, as well as disappointment, regret, and, inevitability, loss, and I kept that theme in mind as I worked on the collection.

3. Do you see the characters in the stories as being interrelated in any way? What would you say is the overarching theme of the collection?

Several of the central characters in these stories are adolescent girls or young women who are in the process of defining themselves in terms of relationships with parents, friends, or lovers. If the collection has an overarching theme, it's the almost unconscious transferring of knowledge and values, not always desirable or positive values, either, from one generation to the next.

4. In "What Saffi Knows," Saffi's inaction is devastating. Can you comment on what is either her unwillingness or her inability to articulate what she knows?

In this story, I wanted to take a close look at a familiar response to a terrible crime, which is the almost general assertion that no one saw anything, no one knew or suspected a thing. Yet it seems unlikely that a criminal act can occur in a neighbourhood, or a small town, and go completely unnoticed. It seems to me people do observe and take note, and yet we're so accustomed to the normal and routine, we tend to ignore the evidence of our own senses and go on as if nothing were wrong. It is possible, though, that a crime — in this case a child's abduction — could be witnessed by someone unable to communicate what she knew, or by someone whose observations seem irrelevant, untrustworthy, or childish. Saffi is just such a witness. She's only seven years old, incapable, rather than unwilling, to take action. She tries to tell her aunt and her parents that the abducted boy is alive and is a prisoner in the house next door, but she's not very articulate or confident. She's aware that her mind doesn't work quite the way it should, but she can't do anything about this. Her parents are consumed with their own problems and simply don't hear what she's trying to say. They've got problems of their own; they're not particularly attentive or sensitive to their daughter. As a result, Saffi, too, remains a prisoner. Years later, as an adult in a world she sees as almost painfully beautiful, she's unable to free herself from a sense of shame and inadequacy.

5. "Home Schooling" is a vivid depiction of the isolation experienced by a family on an unnamed Gulf Island, yet the characters in the story — from Fredericka and Jane, to Annabel, Sophie and their parents — are all forced to confront that isolation at some point in the story, and each does so differently. How do you think the landscape affects the way they cope with their isolation?

The small gulf island chosen by the girls' father, Harold Dorland, provides him with what amounts to a laboratory in which to conduct his grand experiment in progressive education. For Fredericka and Jane, the island had offered sanctuary and peace, although their idyllic life was changed with the arrival of a beautiful and restless Hollywood actress. For Annabel, and for the other members of her family, the isolation gives a heightened sense of import and clarity to their lives. Everything, including first love, is more intense and fraught. Annabel and her sister, Sophie, cope by immersing themselves in the narrative of their own lives. The enclosed world is like a stage, and they are a little like actors and audiences enthralled with what they're seeing and participating in, and, at the same time, a little uncertain of the outcome.



ABOUT CAROL

Carol Windley is the author of the award-winning collection of short stories *Visible Light*, and the acclaimed novel *Breathing Underwater*. *Visible Light*, her debut collection, was nominated for the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize, the BC Book Prizes, and the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction. Her fiction has been published in literary magazines across Canada, and, in 2002, she won a Western Magazine Award for "What Saffi Knows." Born on Vancouver Island, she has worked as a librarian and taught at Malaspina College. She now lives in Nanaimo with her husband.

6. In “The Family in Black,” all the characters seem to grieve for the loss of different things. Nadia’s father, Jonah, makes beautiful art out of trees, and her new stepfather, Nolan, cuts the trees down. Jonah, made sick by the logging happening just beyond his property line, is not unaware of the irony in this situation, and is willing to acknowledge the apparent hypocrisy in his condemnation of Nolan, yet he admits one must “adapt or die.” How do the characters in this story adapt? Or do they?

The story begins with a wedding feast and a reference to a folk tale in which straw is turned to gold, a hint that Nadia and her father, Jonah, as well as the others, are resilient enough to survive and even to benefit from what seems at first like irredeemable loss. Nadia and Jonah do learn to adapt to change, although not without feeling anguish and even bitterness. In earlier versions of this story, I tried to make Sherry’s second husband, Nolan, a more menacing character, but I couldn’t do it, because Sherry loves him. He can’t be all that bad. In fact, he’s very human and not without charm, as even Nadia discovers, in the end. Nolan, it turns out, has adapted to significant losses in his own life, perhaps less successfully than it would appear, since with his own daughter, Marni, he’s an overprotective, anxious parent. Perhaps Nadia and Jonah adapt successfully because they have the strength to accommodate the new reality of their lives, while remaining true to who they are.

7. “Felt Skies” ends with Rachel remembering late night call to her mother to come and pick her up. She remembers herself, as she waited, picturing her mother’s drive down the “narrow twisting road,” but then she asks herself, “Was that a picture that didn’t occur to me until later, when I tried my best to reconstruct Bethany’s journey?” This gives a strong sense of foreboding. The reader is left wondering if Bethany ever arrived, or if a car accident occurred, particularly in relation to the next line: “I didn’t doubt for a moment that she would find me and take me safely home.” Can you comment on this? What did you intend the reader to think, and can you discuss why you chose to leave the reader hanging?

Rachel’s life, or the part of her life she remembers in “Felt Skies,” has a heightened, dream-like quality. As she revisits the place where she and her mother, Bethany, once lived, the past returns to her, and it’s as if she’s there again, in that beautifully ordered world her mother created, full of plants and colour and evocative floral perfumes. At the same time, Rachel is aware of the ways in which she failed her mother. In Rachel’s memories, there is a lot of unresolved pain and uncertainty, which made it impossible to end the story on a less ambiguous note. Rachel’s imagination frightened her too, and made her painfully aware of how little control she had over circumstances. She spent her childhood imagining the father she’d never seen. She imagined the life of Dr. Bergius, her employer at the radio station, and his deceased wife and mother. Her imagination allowed her to see her mother in her car on that narrow, unpaved and unlighted country road, and she knew that if anything went wrong, it would be her fault. I think the way Rachel’s memories of that time existed apart from the rest of her life – that is, there weren’t any intervening memories of Bethany – suggests there was a car accident that night, and Bethany never did arrive to take Rachel home.

8. All the stories in *Home Schooling* are set amidst the coastal mountains and the Pacific Ocean. The landscape is described in great detail. These surroundings seem integral to the stories. What would have happened to the stories if the backdrop was another location?

I believe setting in a story is also a character, perhaps even one of the more important and essential characters. Landscape is also a huge part of the imagination, and exists in a kind of symbiotic relationship with the characters and the action of the story. Also, it seems to me the more authentic and real the setting of a story, the more reliable the narrative voice seems.

9. The characters in the collection all seem to be considering life-altering or key moments of their existence, while being occupied with very ordinary activities. Marisa recalls the death of her mother while at a campfire with her partner and his son. Alex considers her friendship with Désirée while at an art exhibit. Graham thinks about his mother and absent father while searching for his wife's errant dogs. Can you comment on how you have juxtaposed the ordinary and the extraordinary?

The campfire at the retreat centre where Marisa, Ben, and Ben's four-year-old son, Logan, are holidaying, reminds Marisa of a summer camp she was sent to as a child when her mother was seriously ill. In "The Joy of Life," an exhibition of paintings by her friend Désirée evokes for Alex her stay at an artist's colony in Wales, where she last saw Désirée who was her dearest friend, and whose daughter, Loren, Alex later raises as her own child. In both cases, a fairly unremarkable occasion or object serves as a key to unlock memory. In the process, the central character understands, even if only fleetingly, that otherwise unconnected places and people have the power to give her life a certain symmetry, meaning, and grace.

10. In "The Reading Elvis" and "Sand and Frost," both Graham and Lydia are confronting their past and present circumstances, questioning the events that have allowed them to arrive where they are now. For both of them, tragic, untimely death has had a profound effect on their lives. How do you see their experiences as similar and how do you see them as different? Neither of them seems to have resolved their grief. Do you believe that is an impossibility?

In "The Reading Elvis," Graham tries to recover a sense of purpose and happiness after Annette dies, but this isn't something he can achieve with any real success. He's haunted by a conviction that people leave, just as his father left, at first for weeks or months at a time, and then permanently, and that nothing adequately compensates for their absence. The image of a forever youthful Elvis Presley haunting a culture and its collective imagination provides Graham with a vivid metaphor for the loss of his wife, Annette, and his parents. He tries valiantly to forge new connections with people, but things slip away from Graham. Even his wife Sarah's beloved dogs slip away from him. He has no choice but to confront the solitary nature of existence. Graham's grief is more immediate than Lydia's is in "Sand and Frost," where two generations separate her from a tragic and violent event, but still, she's aware of the lingering effects on her family. It's in her genes, she imagines her grandmother telling her, and inescapable. As with Graham in "The Reading Elvis," Lydia deals with grief in an imaginative and sensitive fashion, but Lydia is younger and more resilient than Graham, and in the end, she finds a way to reconcile herself with her family's history.

11. In many of the stories, there is a multiplicity of voices and points of view. Does this make your job as a storyteller easier or more challenging?

Making a change in point-of-view in a story is always a difficult decision. Because of a story's brevity and focus on one character, who is usually the central narrator, a change in point-of-view can be risky. It's the central character you want the reader to identify with and accept as a competent, authentic voice. However, there are times when the story seems enriched and enlivened by a different perspective, which is when I'm willing to be less cautious and a little more experimental with the narrative.

12. Can you comment on the foreboding that seems to permeate many of the stories in the collection?

I think the sense of foreboding — and I agree that it's there — originates in the theme that links the stories. It has to do with the knowledge these characters acquire almost as soon as their milk teeth erupt: that life is beautiful and fraught, enchanting and volatile all at the same time and can never, never be taken for granted.

13. What do you hope readers will take from your book?

I hope readers find the characters in these stories interesting enough that, at least for a time, they take up residence in their imagination. I'd like to think the fictional lives and situations in the stories give the readers the sense they're meeting people who, if not real, might have been real, or who act and think and experience life in its variety and mystery as if they were indeed real. The short story is an ideal literary form for dealing with what the

writer Lorrie Moore calls “beautiful pain,” and, if the writer is lucky, offers reader and writer alike a close-up look at the consequences, hazards and wonder of human relationships.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In “What Saffi Knows,” Saffi, for some reason, refuses to acknowledge what Arthur Dawsley has done. What does this mean for Saffi and for the bird-boy? Were you surprised at her response to her discovery?
2. How do the characters cope with the isolation in “Home Schooling?” How is their physical and metaphorical isolation described? After Nori’s failed fire attempt, she feels that, even though her plans went awry, that is “was a small celebration, in honour perhaps of some small triumph she couldn’t yet identify.” What do you think this triumph is? Does it have anything to do with her own sense of isolation?
3. In “Family in Black,” Nadia is forced to reconcile the fact that her family has changed, and that she now has two new families. How does she make peace with this change? What does it mean when she thinks “of the red-tailed hawks evicted from their forest, their panicked shadows passing over her, as ominous and misplaced as Nolan’s deer in the snowy night. It wasn’t easy to achieve balance.”
4. As discussed above, a major theme in the collection is memory. In “Sand and Frost,” how does Lydia frame the looming family memory of the murder-suicide of her grandmother’s family? How does Alex in “The Joy of Life,” question her memories when looking at the paintings by Désirée?
5. In “Children’s Games,” what is the symbolism of the painting of the same name that Marisa’s mother had cut out of the library book? Why do you think Marisa changed her name? Her reasoning is that she did it “for luck, for euphony, for distance; because she felt like it.” Is there something more to this?
6. What moral and ethical choices do the characters make? Which choices did you agree with? Which ones didn’t you agree with? Why?
7. In what ways do the events in the book reveal evidence of the author’s world view?