

Mackenzie Rogers

The Stories We Tell Ourselves and Others

Gilbert Allen. *The Beasts of Belladonna*. Eugene, OR: Stock Publishers, 2020.

Gilbert Allen has written a rich collection of stories in *The Beasts of Belladonna*. The interwoven stories are set in Belladonna, a fictional gated community in South Carolina. Although the characters seem protected from the world by their gate, they face exterior problems, like uncontrollable weather, and interior ones, like past traumas. Allen explores the illusion of truth with the illusion of protection from outside forces within the gated community, as these outside forces make their way into the characters' homes and reveal the characters' true natures. Ultimately, Allen's stories consider the human capacity for authenticity, and urge us to turn inward to question the difficulties and inhibitions that plague us on our journey toward the genuine.

In "Weather," Allen focuses on appearance versus action in his story about the couple Noel and Hilda Willis. In this first-person narrative, Hilda explains how a severe drought impacted her relationship with Noel. The couple's differences are seen in how Noel and Hilda cope. While Noel uses logic and reason to deal with their circumstances, Hilda turns to her faith in prayer. Because of their differences, tensions rise for the couple when they discuss how to get through the drought. When Noel tells his wife, "Prayers can't change the weather, Hilda," she suggests that it doesn't hurt to try. Upset by Hilda's differing way of handling their situation, Noel asks, "Are you praying for rain?" When Hilda tells her husband, "Well, it can't hurt," Noel leaves the room and the conversation, separating himself from his wife. But, once the drought ends, Hilda's beloved pet bird, Dovie, passes away. Afterward, Hilda recalls how Noel once rescued Dovie: "Noel is a good man. He didn't have to bring Dovie home on that day. He could've let her stay out there in that June sun. A lot of so-called Christians wouldn't have stopped their cars." While Noel appears to be against Hilda's religious beliefs, his actions of rescuing Dovie, and the narrative Hilda crafts around those events, reestablishes their connection. This is a pivotal moment in the characters' search for authentic connection. Hilda connects with Noel through his actions, which speak louder than their words to each other ever could.

In "Dog Days," Allen's characters are faced with past traumas, and tricky situations reveal dark and hidden selves from which the

secluded gate of Belladonna provides no protection. Clayton and Martha Brown escaped to Belladonna after the couple suffered a life-threatening break-in that left Martha physically and mentally scarred. But the couple must face another problem when their neighbor, Teresa Torrido, the weather woman for the local tv station, becomes a parasite in the couple's lives.

Clayton, the narrator of "Dog Days," explains that the trouble starts when Teresa's pet chihuahua continuously barks at the Browns. Agitated by the dog's incessant barking, Martha kills the dog by shooting it with a water hose. After Martha's despicable act, she tells Clayton, "The premises are secured." Clayton wraps the dog in a blanket and takes it to their neighbor. Clayton takes the responsibility of protecting his wife from her cruel act, but the couple's problems don't end with Teresa; they are only beginning. Clayton tries to protect Martha from the outside world, but, in reality, it is his internal desire from which he is trying to shield her. Allen hints at Clayton's desires by describing his interaction with Teresa: "I watched her hips move behind her denim cutoffs while I listened to the squish and squeak of the sponge. I couldn't help myself." Clayton's confession gives the reader a glimpse into the desires that he tries to hide from his wife behind the gates of Belladonna, and the dubious motives that often underlie our (in)authenticity; Clayton may be protecting his wife from himself most of all.

While most of the stories in the collection are first-person narratives, Allen plays with point of view in "Confessions," with the story transitioning from omniscient narrator to first-person. The story begins at the Belladonna Methodist Church with Reverend Roger Rogers performing the Christmas Eve service. During the service, we see some familiar faces: Noel and Hilda Willis, Clayton and Martha Brown, and Teresa Torrido. After the narrator sets up the scene for the characters, Allen transitions the narration to Noel Willis, who relates his views of the night's events. After hearing Noel, we hear from Hilda, the Reverend, and Teresa. While Noel and Hilda's narratives are directed toward the reader, Reverend Rogers' and Teresa's are religious confessions. Noel and Hilda's differing perspectives highlight the illusion of truth and the personal nature of the stories we tell ourselves and others. Reverend Rogers' and Teresa's confessions might provide a more accurate view of their inner lives; these confessions to the Almighty, that perhaps lack the burden of interpersonal interaction, offer the reader a more personal and authentic reading of the characters. Allen repositions the reader, revealing a more genuine sense of these characters, once again enabling our own interrogation of and search for our authentic selves.