

J. Robert Baker

Negotiating the Ordinary

Kathryn Schville. *What Luck, This Life*. Spartanburg, SC: Hub City Press, 2018.

Kathryn Schville has written a fine and eloquent collection of stories in *What Luck, This Life*. These interconnected stories are set in Kiser, Texas, after pieces of equipment and bodies have fallen on the town when the Space Shuttle Columbia disintegrates. The people of Kiser continue their ordinary lives even as they face the singular, and sometimes grisly, tragedy of the loss of the Columbia and its crew. Schville's book has been compared to Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* and Elizabeth's Strout's *Olive Kitteredge*. Certainly, *What Luck, This Life* fits into that tradition, but Schville's accepting and compassionate treatment of characters harks back to Anton Chekhov's clinical approach, which supports his characters making the best of the lot life has allowed them; Schville's wise narrative method permits her characters to grapple as best they can with the irregularities of their lives as they discover the debris from the Columbia. The shuttle may have broken up on reentry into the earth's atmosphere, but Schville's characters hold together as they negotiate the inequalities created by gender, sexuality, race, and class in America.

Carter Bostic and Wes McFarland, in two of the early stories, typify the perseverance of Schville's characters and her sympathetic understanding of them. In "Bostic's" Carter struggles with her husband to make a go of their convenience store in the straightened economy of east Texas; she yearns for a horizon beyond Kiser and the people whom she has known all her life. She also hopes for an end to Newland Sparks's unwanted advances. Reading Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Carter thinks that had she married Grady McFarland rather than Roy Bostic, she would not be in the situation she is. Neither Cather's romanticism nor Carter's own afford her an escape from the economic precariousness in which she and her husband live or from Newland's dirty talk and physical caresses. With "Bostic's," Schville captures the scrapping of long-married couples and Carter's determination to face both troubles even though her options are severely constrained.

In "The Road to Houston," Wes McFarland struggles with coming to terms with being gay in a town of unreflecting homophobia and with being a father to an eleven-year-old son of such extraordinary sensitivity that he heard the space shuttle coming apart. Though Wes's wife accepts Wes when he comes out to her, her father speaks

casually of not wanting “queers” around. Wes drives to Houston on the weekend where he walks past gay clubs as he tries to figure out how to live his life as a gay man. He also worries about fathering his son, who blames himself for his parents’ separation, and how his own changing life will affect his son. He poignantly notices as other people begin to take his place in the boy’s life. Like Carter, Wes shoulders these sufferings quietly. Called in with his bucket truck, he retrieves the torso of Michael Kirkland from a tree. As he frees the broken and crow-beshitted torso, Wes reflects, “If only this were the hardest thing. I reached around Michael Kirkland’s waist and pulled him toward me.” This is not self-pity, for Wes takes up the demands of his life, finds a partner, and continues with his ex-wife to care for their troubled son.

In the story of Gabriel Dixon, Schwille understatedly details the complexity of race. When Peego, another black man, finds a white woman’s hand in the wood pile behind Gabe’s house, he refuses to let Gabe use his cell phone to notify the sheriff’s office because he fears the white power structure. Schwille tempers this stark indication of the town’s racism with Gabe’s sympathy for Cecil Dawson, a white deputy. Aware as anyone else of Dawson’s lordassing his authority over others, Gabe recognizes that Dawson suffers because his son has returned mentally diminished from Desert Storm.

Schwille holds her narrative gaze steadily on the complexity of the human lot—its admirable and its shameful features. She observes even the sexually creepy Newland with care, taking the pulse of his difficult marriage, his speech impediment, his family’s long-standing disapprobation, and his imminent dismissal from the family business for embezzlement. Schwille knows full well her character’s grubby categorization of women into A, B, and C lists and his unpleasant masturbatory sessions, but she fairly records the difficulties of his life.

Schwille touches gently on the gruesome aspects of the Columbia disaster. Parts of the crew’s bodies were not burned as they fell into the atmosphere; people find decapitated torsos in the debris field, a heart by the side of a road, and testicles in a tree. Schwille makes the body parts ordinary facts in the natural and human worlds. The tree in which Kirkland’s torso lands is just beginning to bud, hinting at the tenacity of life even amid tragedy, and the hand of a white woman falls into the woodpile of a black man, wryly underscoring the shortcomings of the human world.

What Luck, This Life ends with Michael Kirkland’s musing on his life before Columbia breaks up. Surveying the planet beneath him, Kirkland recalls all that he loves and blesses it. His affirmation may seem, at first, at odds with the difficulties Schwille’s characters face, but it resonates with her judicious affirmation of her characters as they shoulder the lot they have been given.