Daniel Woodrell's The Outlaw Album: Short, honest, brutal and beautiful stories

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The Outlaw Album, Little Brown, 2011

Daniel Woodrell (born 1953) is the author of eight novels, including *Winter's Bone*, which was made into an Academy Award-nominated film (See, "An Ozark noir: *Winter's Bone*"), and *Woe to Live On*, which was filmed by Ang Lee as *Ride With the Devil*. *The Outlaw Album* is his first book of short stories.

Set in the small towns and rural areas of Woodrell's native Missouri and Arkansas, the stories in *The Outlaw Album* depict troubles of a universal nature. Issues of trust, terror, hopelessness and wished-for peace, and deep material deprivation are explored and the particulars of each story are built carefully. In many hands, these tales could tip into mawkishness, but Woodrell has a rare talent for knowing what is enough and when to push the envelope; only rarely does he stumble.

The reader is pulled into the minds and lives of these characters—the man whose child is missing, the veteran returned from war and soon to be sent back, the old man wondering when drug-addicted thugs will return for revenge—and carried along, ensnared in their stories, even knowing after the first few that things are just not going to work out well. These are not stories with happy endings, or even endings in the traditional sense of things being neatly tied up; in Woodrell's world resolution is a futile wish. These are small paintings of particular instances that tell the whole stories of the people involved.

Overall the collection is superb, bringing to mind Flannery O'Connor at her strongest. Woodrell has a mastery of the language and his instinct for timing, how much to reveal and when, is perhaps unsurpassed by any living writer today. Taken out of context, some of the sentences might be laughable or seem overdone, but Woodrell has a talent for sculpting the paragraphs and putting them together in such a way as to have everything in its place, each part blending into a seamless, natural whole.

The first story in the book, "The Echo of Neighborly Bones," in which a man kills his neighbor and then continues to dig him up and "kill" him again is written with a very dark humor. From the first line, "Once Boshell finally killed his neighbor he couldn't seem to quit killing him," the reader is drawn in and one could find oneself smiling a bit. By the end of the tale, that small smile would be a pretty tight thing—any laughter would be of the nervous sort.

Some of the best stories are some of the shortest, one of which, "Florainne," comes in at a scant four pages, but it has a power that left this reader reeling. Told in the first person by a man whose daughter went missing years before, it is a sad and terrifying depiction of isolation and impotent anger at the world. The narrator's anguish and suspicion are communicated with a quiet intensity—his painful questions of "what if" and wishes for a different life for the girl are like tortured whispers. One gets the oppressive feeling of being trapped in the man's mind, and the last line lands like a punch to the stomach.

Another story, "Uncle," is told from the point of view of an abused and possibly developmentally delayed woman who now takes care of her abuser uncle, from whom she saved another woman by striking him on the head and crippling him. Her recounting of that day and his resulting lingering injuries are rendered in the

almost flat sighing tone often exhibited by survivors of domestic and sexual abuse.

There is a wariness and a tiredness at her situation that Woodrell captures sensitively and without, one is relieved to say, the typical forced courage which seems the required attitude for victims of such things to take in fiction these days. Woodrell's woman is stuck, and her fear is shared by the reader when she reports that, "Uncle was yet alive inside that big old baby, and his eyes was wanting what babies don't even know about." Her subsequent actions are technically abhorrent, but understandable.

Secondary characters are treated with as much care as the main characters, fully drawn and fleshed out. Mary, in "Black Step," has a reprehensible plan in mind involving the main character and narrator, Darden, yet her situation is wrought clearly; given the conditions she faces, and the options she does not have, Darden becomes in her view a small step up. Mary is not demonized, rather she is shown for what she is—a desperate person trying to save herself, if even for just a short while.

Woodrell has a way of blurring the line between the guilty and the victims, but not through ambivalence; rather with an eye toward the complex circumstances in which his characters act and the choices made when no real choices are available. Horrible things are done in these stories, nightmarish situations are brought into the light and the people trapped in them are forced to do things no one would want to do.

How they live through them and continue on in daily tasks after having seen or done these things is honestly depicted by Woodrell. There is no sudden epiphany or deus ex machina to save the characters from their lives. They have to make their way the best they can, and the best is sometimes heartbreakingly awful.

It is Woodrell's ability and willingness to treat these situations and the people in them as real, not to give into the temptation to stereotype or preach, that provides the strength needed for such a series of brutal tales. These are people whom we seldom see in literature, at least not honestly depicted. This is what is, Woodrell is saying; right or wrong—and especially wrong—here we are.

In many of the stories, wherein the characters are doing all they can just to survive, there will be for some the temptation to judge; certainly these are not "nice" situations, and these are not "nice" things that are done. Woodrell does not judge, and ultimately, the reader is given a view of the contradictions facing these people and brought to an understanding of what is sometimes necessary for survival.