

The book jacket for Dorothy Speak's self-published *Reconciliation* also compares her storytelling to that of Alice Munro as well as Joyce Carol Oates. Like Birrell, Speak covers the territory of family, marriage and friendship, but her perspective is very different. Highlighting the minutiae of daily activities, she relentlessly reveals the pettiness and self-absorption of her characters and their failure both to live up to their own potential and to form good relationships with their partners, friends or children. It is difficult to like any of these people, yet Speak brings the reader inside their heads and hearts. She forces readers to recognize circumstances and impulses that shape her characters' unfortunate choices and lack of action—all of which lead to inevitably tragic outcomes. As outlandish as many of the betrayals and infidelities may be, the stories are told with accuracy of description and detail that make them believable.

In 'The Opposite of Truth,' Benta meets intermittently with her cancer-ridden friend Lourdes, and the two exchange insults about their attitudes towards wigs versus hats for cancer victims. Lourdes, who has slept with Benta's ex-husband, takes up with her friend's current lover, causing Benta to spray-paint obscenities on the man's car and then make an appointment to see, and perhaps seduce, Lourdes's healer. The narrator tells us, 'The reason their friendship has endured is that they've always felt free to tell each other the opposite of the truth.' Like most relationships in these stories, this friendship consists of entertaining dialogue and considerable drama but lacks any depth of compassion or empathy.

Dark undertones lurk in all these stories. 'A Penny to Save' starts with 'a queer feeling in the room' when the father lifts his five-year-old daughter from the table and threatens to smear butter on her belly. Later, outside the home, the father's friend lures the girl into sexual foreplay while in the background her brother practices his yoyo to the steady incantation of nursery rhymes.

In the final story, 'The Prime of His Life,' 65-year-old Purdy, who has devoted his life to indulging his self-absorbed wife Madonna, caters to her dying wishes. Meanwhile, their son Winslow, after a lifetime of abuse and neglect, refuses to see his mother. Purdy brings Madonna designer clothes from the extensive wardrobe she has purchased through years of frenzied spending and perpetuates the 'charade' that she is not a patient in a terminal care ward. She shrinks to a grotesque caricature of herself: 'Her earlobes drooped under the weight of heavy costume jewellery On her shrunken feet, her shoes floated.' Her shakily applied lipstick, rouge and mascara have 'a burlesque effect.' She 'stood out like a Christmas tree.

It was what she wanted. She needed to be noticed.' Winslow refuses to go to his mother's funeral and sums her up as a 'fourteen-carat phoney.' Purdy ultimately realizes that it was a sin to have been so enamoured of his vain wife that he has ignored and failed his son. He

concludes that he 'had displayed an egregious lack.'

One way or another, most of the people in this collection-narcissistic, self-serving, exploitive or merely foolish -display an egregious lack. Yet Speak's exquisite attention to the bleak, painful details of their lives leaves the reader wishing that there could be some kind of deliverance or, as the book's title suggests, reconciliation. With an echo of Margaret Atwood, whose blurb on the back of the book describes Speak as 'a wonderful new short story writer,' two of these stories suggest that hope may be found not through human interaction but in the natural environment. 'Authenticity' concludes, 'The light thrown off the lake is transcendent, devastating, redemptive,' and the final sentence in 'Surcease of Sorrow' is 'The river's steadfastness, its neutrality, its senseless beauty strengthened and soothed her.' Albeit remote, there is some sense of hope here.

Any Canadian woman who writes short stories is likely to be compared to Alice Munro, but Munro is in a class of her own. Nonetheless, these two books contain good stories, carefully written, that describe recognizable and moving human portraits and interactions. Birrell's writing is more powerfully engaging than Speak's, but both writers have produced stimulating short-story collections that merit attention.

- *Carol Matthews*

III