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Steve Almond

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Steve Almond, the man whose candy jones fueled the bestseller *Candyfreak*, returns with a collection of stories that both seals his reputation as a master of the modern form and risks getting him arrested. The cast of characters in *The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories* includes a wealthy family certain they have been abducted by space aliens, a sexy magazine editor who falls for a worldclass cad, and a beleaguered dentist who refuses to read his best friend's novel. Michael Jackson and Abraham Lincoln make cameos, as do a variety of desperate and beautiful loonies, all of whom are laid bare, often literally. In these twelve stories, Almond refuses to let his characters off the hook, or to abandon them, until we have seen the full measure of ourselves within their struggle.

The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories Details

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Author : Steve Almond

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From Reader Review The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories for online ebook

Ann Dodge says

some stories better than others of course but well written. Weird that he mostly writes from a woman's point of view.

Steve Petkus says

I'm nuts for short fiction, and Steve Almond is pretty great at the form. In this collection, his themes and characters are fairly varied. (Almond's more recent book of short stories, *God Bless America*, is even more varied; I'll review that gem as soon as I can get my hands on a copy and reread it.) The Lincoln/Douglass story is the greatest thematic departure, to the point where I don't think it fits in this book; in fact, I've reread that story several times, and I just don't get it. Inventive, I guess, yes, but it feels half-baked, almost like a writing program experiment, and I just don't see the point of it. The other 11 stories in this book are really engaging and funny, too. One minor complaint I have is that a full third of the stories here use a similar device toward the end, sometimes in nearly the same phrasing: "But all that was still to come ... For now," etc. etc. I don't dislike that device inherently, as it's a way of spanning time and capturing the reader's imagination that does work. However, to have it show up in 4 stories out of 12 in the same book is not so good, as it becomes a tiny bit too noticeable.

And by the way, Steve Almond is not only an excellent short story writer, he's also authored two fine books of essays that I would recommend: *(Not That You Asked)* is one, and *Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life* is the other. The man is basically funny as hell. In fact, check out the podcast called "Seven Essential Dreams Revisited" on the poetryfoundation.org Web site, where Almond is interviewed about his year as a "failed poet." This is where I first encountered him, and I used to use the podcast of that interview in creative writing class; from there, his humor and insight inspired me to seek out his prose works.

Chris Parthemos says

A patchy book of stories whose best offerings match up with the likes of Ken Liu but whose worst probably ought to have been omitted entirely.

Philip Booth says

Very funny, somewhat ribald collection of stories about modern love, lust, and mores, with some offbeat detours to interludes with Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass; and an oddball discussion among a pop-culture academic specializing in Michael Jackson and a couple of his friends.

I had already read the title story -- in the *New Yorker*? somewhere else -- so I figured Almond's other short stories would be worth reading. Some laugh-out-loud passages, some poignant moments.

I was right. Breezed through this one very quickly.

Great summer read: While on vacation, I picked up a used copy at the Paradise Found bookstore in Anna

Maria.

Sharon says

I had the great pleasure of hearing Steve Almond read a slightly abridged version of his story "Appropriate Sex" from this collection and promptly decided I must jump into his stories headfirst. Overall, I was not disappointed.

The short stories in this book are heartbreaking, some in beauty and others in despair. Almond's humor and ability to push the reader right to the edge keep these stories from becoming maudlin, particularly when we are forced to look inside ourselves through the lens of his characters.

The title story is my favorite and the one that feels the most complete to me. I felt that several of the stories went on for a beat longer than was needed, causing their power to be blunted at the very end.

In addition to the title story, I especially liked "Lincoln, Arisen" which has some of the most startling and beautiful lines I've read anywhere. Only Steve Almond could envision a mystical relationship between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. It's a story that reads like poetry - not a wasted word or unfocused image.

"The Problem of Human Consumption" is another story that sticks with me from this collection. After thirteen years, a father and daughter continue to dance their lives around loss, their actions as mundane and inexplicable as the death they have never discussed. It is haunting.

Some of the stories didn't work as well for me. "The Soul Molecule" felt too insubstantial, as if it was afraid to dig deeper into the story of a family who believes they've been abducted by aliens for the benefit of humankind. "Larsen's Novel," on the other hand, was too drawn out to hold my interest all the way through and I found myself trying to skim forward. The final story in the collection, "Skull," is the most outrageous, although it is really about the simple need that everyone has to be loved and accepted for who they are. I liked this story, but I'm sure there are plenty of readers who would be very put off by the details within.

I enjoyed this collection of stories, but I will say that having heard Steve Almond read one of them aloud may have played a crucial part in my enjoyment of the book as a whole. He is an amazing reader, and being able to imagine his voice as I read each story added a dimension that I might otherwise have missed.

Deonne Kahler says

Steve Almond is funny, funny, funny and these stories are all of that plus sweet (but not too) and smart. Totally delightful.

Sarah Etter says

even though the story "lincoln, arisen" left me a little cold, the rest of this collection was so damned good i couldn't take a star away. expertly narrated and structured - almond is a master of convincingly writing from the perspective of women, men, everyone. each story was tightly wound and left me feeling like i'd been

punched in the face by a life lesson. adored this.

Jb says

Even the acknowledgement make for a good read.

Riley says

Be careful or you might find yourself on thriftbooks ordering everything else Steve Almond has written. These stories absolutely emanate the tender heartache of everyday life. His cultural notations are as eloquent as they are deep. The characters are you, or someone you know.

Dana says

Steve Almond is not only hilarious, but also writes with great insight into human failings and those things that make human connections run awry.

Betsy Robinson says

The first five stories in this 2005 collection are vignettes, romantic sketches, and domestic slices of life—not as exciting, inventive, or daring as the full-bodied stories in *God Bless America* (2011), which was my second taste of Steve Almond's work after discovering a story of his in *Tin House*. There are boyfriend/girlfriend, college teachers/students, kids at a baseball game scenarios . . .

Then came the sixth story, "Lincoln Arisen," which reads like a one-act surreal play (think Pinter or Beckett) with narrative *cum* stage directions describing action through a series of stream-of-conscious dreamlike scenes mostly between Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. I couldn't decide if I liked it, if it worked, if it was immature playwriting by a writer enamored with Lincoln or something more profound. In any case, it was different and reading it after reading *Lincoln in the Bardo* made me want to read a Lincoln biography. Not a bad outcome from reading a short story.

This was followed by a dated, somewhat sophomoric story about Michael Jackson; then a mature and moving story about the confused understandings between a widowed father and his teenage daughter ("The Problem of Human Consumption"); a gorgeous little story about love lost and then promised by an overworked computer repairman ("Wired for Life"); a nostalgic elegy to immature love ("Summer, as in Love"); then the hilarious and ultimately moving story about friendship and a really awful novel ("Larsen's Novel"). This is Steve Almond at his funniest best and the reason to read this book. If he hasn't already done it, I wish he'd do a collection of stories that include shrinks, all of whom seem to be named Dr. Oss (I've read three so far); and the last story, fittingly titled "Skull," is a sexy look at real intimacy.

This book is a potpourri of well-written stories, some slight and immature, others a full meal, that don't

belong together in a book except for the fact that they are written by Almond and portend the talent and skill that explode in the later collection (*God Bless America*). I understand he is now self-publishing, and maybe his even more recent work similarly throbs with the life and hilarity I cherish. It was interesting to see his beginnings in this anthology of his younger self's work, and it was wonderful to read the really good stories in the bunch.

R.L. Maizes says

A collection of stories that are funny and deep, surprising and inevitable. Almond's writing is full of heart. The stories will make you think about what it means to be human.

Sian Griffiths says

Pretty good stuff. Almond's writing is clear and engaging, making the book a quick read--which is not to say it is without depth. The stories are driven by people dealing with diverse traumas, whether those be unusual sexual requests or a friend asking another to read his novel manuscript. Almond is a master at quick characterization and wonderful dialogue that pulls off the rare trick of being both true to the character and surprising and insightful.

To be totally honest, though, I'm not sure how well this book works as a *collection*. As much as I enjoyed the individual stories (especially "The Evil B. B. Chow," "I Am As I Am," "Larsen's Novel," and "Skull"), they vary so greatly in tone and subject, that there doesn't seem to be enough to hold them together. It seems, at times, like the book was simply a pile of the last twelve stories Almond published. Even the ordering of the stories seemed under-thought-though at times. (Who decided to follow "Lincoln, Arisen," a relatively sober story about Lincoln and Douglass, with "The Idea of Michael Jackson's Dick"?)

That quibble aside, I love the heart in these stories. Even in his humor pieces, I sense Almond's compassion for his characters. They may goof up sometimes, but so do we all, and though their mistakes may be serious and even, at times, fatal, Almond doesn't give up on them. Instead, their stories become a form of redemption--perhaps for us the readers as much as for the characters Almond invents.

Andrew says

Should Steve Almond bother you? Should you find it condescending that he's got a reading comprehension test on his website? Should you get the icks from Almond's writing about teaching the sexy, sexed-up female students in a writing workshop very much resembling his own at Boston College? Should you down some ipecac because his most assured writing in *The Evil B.B. Chow and Other Stories* is in a story called "The Idea of Michael Jackson's Dick"?

Ugh, yes. Steve, you have freaked us out.

But what's especially bothersome is the writing in B.B. Chow is technically good. It's measured. It's pointed. It's—well, it's like this passage from a story about a woman with a crush on a computer repairman,

“Wired for Life”:

At the word warranty, Charlie shied away. His eyes welled into little pools of sullenness.

October, he said.

Janie nudged her boobs against the glass counter. The receipt says 90 days.

Charlie smiled miserably. He did not look at Janie, nor especially at her boobs, but carried the adapter with its cord dragging behind and set it down on his worktable and disappeared into the back of the shop. He returned with his spool of solder and hunkered down before his sadder [sic] gun while Janie pretended not to notice. There was a delicious, excruciating aspect to the tableau.

I didn't know pro writers were allowed to use the word boobs! It's fantastic! We finally have a word for those megastructures on the cover of Maxim, Stuff, and FHM, for those neat balloons of fat (to be generous) that are the precursor of one's being punched by one's girlfriend! I had had to use the cocophonous term breasts. Or bosoms. Or nothing at all. Boobs! Neat! Thanks, Steve; quoting your best writing in your new collection gives me permission to talk about boobs without fear of retribution. You've also liberated bestiality (in “Appropriate Sex”), President-on-abolitionist action (in “Lincoln, Arisen”), and the idea of Michael Jackson's dick (in “The Idea of Michael Jackson's Dick”) as fruitful writing topics. They're like new veins of gold to all writers. Let the rush begin.

Ok. Yeah. The serious part.

We're talking medium-abuse here. A book is one medium, like television, graffiti, or a girlfriend's left hook (don't you dare say it can't carry a message). Books are expensive. They demand expensive writing to justify the cost of paying the sponsoring editor, the acquisitions editor, the editorial assistant, the cover designer, the rights assistant, the manufacturer, the packager, the copyeditor, the UPS guy, the Barnes and Noble salesperson, and eventually the author, instead of, say, using that money and energy to, say, feed people. With the exception of “I Am as I Am” and “Larsen's Novel,” a fine piece about the obligations between grown men, the stories in The Evil B.B. Chow are cheap. They are arrived at cheaply and leave the reader feeling cheaper. But, of course, saying this book would be better placed in a cheap medium like the Internet is like saying Hollywood shouldn't have remade The In-Laws: Hollywood shouldn't have, but hey, the money's there, and they have mouths to feed too. It's a frustrating thing, this—we know Almond can write well. His culinary piece in the current issue of Tin House so captured the care and humor in cooking a favorite meal for friends that I wondered if all that time I spent watching “Great Chefs” in college would have been better spent reading cooking magazines.

The Evil B.B. Chow is entertaining in its cheap way (boobs!). But Almond cribs simultaneously from that of Esquire and Toby Wolff—two types of writing many readers enjoy but which should never end up on the same page. He should pick one or the other at one time, and so should you.

Sandra says

This is a humorous collection that deals with a wide set of issues like love, death, and politics, with some historical fiction thrown in. Almond's use of slang and colloquialism in the narrative give the stories a sense

of accessibility, but left this reader feeling there is something missing from the narrative, some important emotional element. Not all of the stories feel this way; some are powerful and linger in the mind after reading them. The story, "I am as I am," is one of these, a coming of age story about a boy who accidentally kills another boy with a bat. And there is also "Summer, As in Love," a tender and sad love story.

The language in these stories is more straightforward, less stylized, less wanting to be cool, which lend the narrative a serious hue that make the story wonderful. This decision makes me ponder the use of slang, witty and outlandish language in stories, and also for that matter, the easy talkative tone that many stories these days take. For the most part, if used in concert with a serious subject, this kind of language is amazing. I can think of Lorrie Moore as an example and Junot Diaz, whose street talk offers insight into the desperation of character or heighten the neurosis another character feels. That is not to say that witty language or clever descriptions are not necessary in a piece of serious work, but it needs to be balanced with the emotional weight of the story, which in my opinion, Almond fears getting next to.

In the title story, a woman slowly allows herself to fall in love, only to find out she's been conned into loving the person, and then dumped. What makes the story entertaining is the narrator's almost indifference to her lacking love life. When B.B. Chow apologizes for asking about her divorce, she thinks, "I don't feel especially disappointed, though. I was married to a man who couldn't operate a washing machine. I got out. The end."

It is this kind of apathy that drives the story along. She slowly succumbs to B.B. Chow's odd emotional sensitivity (he's a doctor who cries), even despite his shortcomings, "Sadly, B.B. is not much of a kisser. He presses too hard, and he doesn't know how to modulate the whole mouth-opening-tongue-moving-forward thing." You accept the tone, and expect the story to finish on this note. That is why when she finally realizes B.B.'s been using the same lines on her as he has with other women, you expect a farcical remark that would show her anger and disappointment, instead of the serious prose that seems to come out of nowhere.

"I'm weary of moving through life in this way, punished for my capabilities, betrayed by the glib promises of love. I'm weary of managing these disappointments. I'm weary of my body's gruesome tick. And I'm weary of telling women it can be different."

I'm sorry, but boo hoo. If we had any clue that these were things she thought about or were hinted at, even from the narrator (who is first person), the weight of them would truly be felt.

The thing is, the stories feel like the author is holding back, but they're still funny, full of great sentences like this one, "Self-deception, I'd told them, in my profound deeply feeling teacher voice, is the only worthy enemy."

I just wish there was more than funny.