



Last Year, When We Were Young

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WINNER: 2014 AHWA Australian Shadows Award, Collected Work

'Last Year, When We Were Young' brings together 16 tales that defy conventions of genre and style, every one with an edge sharper than a razor and darker than a night on Neptune.

From the darkly hilarious "All the Clowns in Clowntown" to the heart-breaking and disturbing title story, this debut collection from multi-award nominated author and illustrator Andrew J McKiernan pulls no punches.

"A troubling collection of weird and twisted tales. Sometimes funny, sometimes horrifying; always clever, always disturbing. Highly entertaining!" - Jonathan Maberry, New York Times bestselling author of CODE ZERO

"McKiernan's stories are hauntingly dark, evocatively written and viscerally compelling. With little regard for genre boundaries, McKiernan creates utterly convincing characters who will take you on a journey through fully realised worlds, and every journey is more than worth it." - Alan Baxter, author of Bound and Realmshift

"These clever, compelling stories explore the dark edges of human existence. Utilising deceptive, often colloquial prose and an array of startling imagery, McKiernan has staked his own claim in a dark corner of imaginative fiction. Start reading him now; this guy will go far." - Gary McMahon, author of The Concrete Grove

"McKiernan is a magician. He performs magic tricks in every story, spinning us around, making us believe one thing before showing us we were wrong all along. His stories are pure magic, staying with you like an echo long after reading." - Kaaron Warren, author of Sights & Walking the Tree

Last Year, When We Were Young Details

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Author : Andrew J. McKiernan

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From Reader Review Last Year, When We Were Young for online ebook

Greg Chapman says

Here is the link to my review over at Thirteen O'Clock:

<http://www.thirteenoclock.com.au/last...>

Matthew says

I have read some amazing collections this year.

Works by Laird Barron, Hank Schwaeble, and Clive Barker... to name just a few.

So when I say that McKiernan's collection Last Year, When We Were Young ranks alongside those previous books I don't say it lightly. Last Year, When We Were Young was one of my favourite reads of the year so far, and its stories are still haunting me weeks after I finished it.

Collecting all of McKiernan's previous short work, Last Year, When We Were Young is one of the most impressive collections I have ever read.

Period.

From the opening story (The Memory of Water) through to the last (Last Year, When We Were Young) McKiernan draws you into a series of tales that not only deal with the absurd and the horrific, but also the notions of deep loss and grief. And it works. It works so well in fact that it's still haunting me weeks later.

So what did I love about this collection? Where do I even start?

One of the things that floored me reading through this collection was McKiernan's width and breadth as a writer. He is never limited or bound by convention in this book, and he openly explores paths that I would never have considered possible with his story telling. Take, for example, his tale "All the Clowns in Clowntown". Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine that I would read a story about the last surviving resistance members of a clown counter revolution. And never did I imagine that such a story would work. But fuck me, it does. McKiernan also embraces old school horror, weird survivalism, the grotesque, and tragedy throughout this book, and seamlessly shifts from locations such as urban cities right through to the hot and dusty desert. And his use of prose is, to put it bluntly, magical.

McKiernan has a vivid and haunting way with words that is very reminiscent of writers such as King (in his early days) and McCarthy. He never overplays his hand, but as you read you are slowly drawn into his dark visions so deeply that they resonates with you for a long time afterwards. The title story (Last Year, When We Were Young) highlights this by starting out as a seemingly innocent tale about teenagers and moving quickly to a world dying due to a mysterious virus that ages their bodies rapidly.

McKiernan's characterisation is also impressive. Every protagonist is believable, fascinating, and darkly

layered. You cannot help but relate to them from the get go, and as each tale unfolds you find yourself moving through a wide range of emotions (joy, grief, anger, and hopelessness to name just a few). This is yet another reason why this book is masterful. No two stories are the same, but all are intrinsically linked to each other by an exploration of defining human emotions. Whether he is telling a gothic tale, or exploring a meteorite that is not all that it appears to be, McKiernan's words send you on a cathartic exploration of yourself and all those around you.

The pacing is seamless, and every story strong and worthy of inclusion in this collection. Last Year, When We Were Young never stumbles, and kept me enthralled (and emotionally drained) from start to finish. I cannot find any faults with it. I literally adored this collection, and find it criminal that McKiernan's work is not as well known as it should be outside of Australia.

If you want to read a riveting collection of stories that cover a wide range of topics and styles. Buy this book.

If you want to be taken on a journey that will be cathartic to your soul. Buy this book.

If you want to see a wordsmith delight, horrify, and grip you in ways you never thought possible. Buy this book.

Actually... just buy this book.

Original, entertaining, and stirring, Last Year, When We Were Young is one of the most powerful collection of stories I've ever read. McKiernan mines the dark veins of the human soul on every single page, leaving you both moved and disturbed at the same time.

Highly recommended for all readers.

5 out of 5 stars.

Danny Seipel says

Aussie horror writer (although diversifying now I believe) presents a collection of his short stories spanning multiple genres.

Dark (although, two of them have happy endings), disturbing and consistently excellent.

Amanda J Spedding says

There's an undeniable skill in being able to tell a complete story within a limited amount of words, and not everyone can do it. Andrew McKiernan is one of those writers who damn well can.

See complete review here: <http://amandajspedding.com/>

Nora Peavy says

The title weaves its way through every short story in this anthology. It's been a long time since I've read a collection that touched my heart and made me weep. I wept not with sadness, but with gladness. Andrew McKiernan took me on an emotional and healing journey, for you see, I've been mourning the death of my father and I haven't felt much, mostly numb, but his stories took me on a cathartic journey and played to my heartstrings. Every story spoke to me of a loss of innocence, when I was younger and more hopeful, when I didn't have to deal with a blinding grief, but that changed in just one year. So quickly, I lost my breath. I couldn't breathe. The changes his characters went through and how they dealt with death literally or figuratively, helped me to grieve.

McKiernan's writing style is lyrical and worthy of being literary, which often isn't a term used in the speculative fiction community, but it should be celebrated and used more. The imagery in his writing is bold and beautiful, and this belongs in our community of the strange, the dark, the weird, and the macabre. Death, any kind of death can be beautiful or senseless, as he shows us. McKiernan is a kick ass, entertaining, genre bending beast of a writer. I'd keep my eyes on him; Mr. McKiernan has a lot of storytelling left to do, and he's just getting started.

Isobel Blackthorn says

Last Year, When We Were Young contains some of the finest horror writing I have come across. Edgy, intelligent in conception, and delivered with poise in an easy and engaging literary style, McKiernan has penned a compelling collection of shorts brimming with darkness and menace.

My favourite is 'Daivadana', a story of Mark Reynolds, a son sent to Tajikistan to do his father's bidding and discover what is going on inside a new high rise development in a city rebuilding after war. He meets Jahandar and his son, Kurshed and through each, learns of the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism, its power and particularly its propensity for summoning evil. Here is one of those perfectly balanced stories, containing all the elements of a well-written thriller with all the elements of well-written horror, at once elegant, stylish, intriguing and fast-paced. McKiernan displays a deep knowledge of his subject and makes use of that knowledge to full effect, peppering his story with insights:

'He realised, what really matters is not what colours the players wear, but who gets to hand out the costumes in the first place.'

Throughout this collection, the reader will encounter the weird, the unusual, the grotesque, the disturbing and the tragic. McKiernan never slips into horror for horror's sake. Instead he exercises restraint. Each story is unique and strong, the reader taken to a variety of settings, the collection diverse and rich and haunting. Highly recommended. <https://isobelblackthorn.com/2018/06/...>

Frank Errington says

Review copy

I've mentioned before how much I enjoy what's coming out of the Australian horror writing community and this new collection of shorts from Andrew J. McKiernan just adds to that impression.

Last Year, When We Were Young cover's his young career from his first published short in July of 2007 though November of 2012. Sixteen stories, with only one thing in common, they are all exceptional.

It all starts with a delightful fantasy with beautiful prose, "The Memory of Water," which opens with the line, "'The ocean, it remembers us,' David said, the heel of his foot dredging shallow trenches in the sand."

There's the powerful didactic story "White Lines, White Crosses," A tale of speed and peer pressure told in a haunting manner.

I loved "Calliope: A Steam Romance." A bit of steampunk fantasy, beautifully told. It's at this point in the collection that I'm getting the feeling I'm reading something special as McKiernan does with words what a great painter does with his brushstrokes.

There is a distinct diversity in the stories found in this collection, as evidenced in "Love Death," an intriguing story of a newlywed who turns to a necromancer to bring back his bride after a wedding day accident and the consequence that follows.

I keep thinking that I won't comment on every story, but each one is even better than the last. One of my favorites is, "The Message," in which Marion leaves her abusive husband and takes a job answering a very special phone and taking messages. Sounds simple, right? I really enjoyed where this one went.

At the end of the book, the author tells where the inspiration came from for select stories. "Back in 2006, my second son (who would have been about 7 years of age at the time) came home from school with a birthday card he'd made for me from clip-art. It read; All the clowns in Clowntown, wish you barrels of fun on your birthday! There was a cartoony picture of a clown on front , and the instant I read it I knew there was a story hidden inside." The resulting story was "All the Clowns In Clowntown." There's even a second visit to Clowntown later in the collection.

Autosarcophagy (look it up) is a big part of "The Final Degustation of Doctor Ernest Blenheim. That's as good a place as any to end this review.

Last Year, When We Were Young is among my favorite reads for 2014. Currently available in both paperback and for the Kindle through Amazon.com from Satalyte Publishing. Plus, if you subscribe to Kindle Unlimited you can read it for FREE.

This one gets my highest recommendation, I can all but guarantee you won't be disappointed.

Matthew Morrison says

This author has the masterful knack for immersing the reader in each new world within the first half-page. From a steam punk Sydney, to a post-apocalyptic outback town; from a seedy 1940s bar to a core-drilling base on a long-term comet.

In the interests of full disclosure, I should point out that Andrew did the artwork for my first ever published short story.

That aside, this is a fantastically diverse collection.

Sure, there are some stories that do nothing for me. But the beauty of a short story collection is such that

there are some absolute gems of speculative fiction here.

Stand outs for me are 'Torch Song', 'Love Death', and 'The Message'. But to my mind, the pièce de résistance is the skin-crawlingly creepy 'The Final Degustation of Doctor Ernest Blenheim' (a story that has actually influenced my own writing).

These short stories will turn your stomach, will make you shift uncomfortably in your chair, will have you chuckling quietly, and will prickle your skin with gooseflesh. Immerse yourself.

Pat says

I used to say I didn't really like short stories. That's not true anymore. I have read several books of short stories recently and quite enjoyed them. Up until this book I would have said that for me the collection needs to have some common thread more than just the same genre, so single author collections are preferred. This is single author, and what an author! I loved everything about this book of dark tales. I don't know what genre to classify this, seemed to be lots.

All I can say is Try it - there is nothing to lose and possibly, I mean more than likely, lots to gain. I'll be watching for further works from this guy, that's for sure! 6 stars!

Phillip Berrie says

This is a collection of short stories by someone I consider to be one of Australia's most promising short story writers. It should also have another half star.

One of the things I like most about this author's work is the amount of scholarship that obviously goes into his stories, Another is the wide range of genres and situations he is willing to explore.

I have read a number of these stories before (and they're still good) and it is great to see them finally collected together in one place. My three favourites would have to be: 'All the Clowns in Clowntown', 'Daivadana' and the title story 'Last Year, When We Were Young'.

Caveat: I know this author and I am soon to join him as a Satalyte Publishing author. But that doesn't mean he can't write a damn good story.

Amanda Kool says

'Last Year, When We Were Young' is loaded with well-written, gripping tales, each uniquely different in tone, voice and theme.

McKiernan's style is both descriptive and restrained. His turn of phrase is a delight. His characters are each as full and flawed and realised as you could want for their bite-sized turns on the page.

From the eerie premise of 'The Message', through the dreadful certainty of 'Love Death', to the inevitable fate of the hero of 'Calliope: A Steam Romance'; each story creates a world that is distinct and unexpected.

The tales that stick with me are those where the horror was brought home to roost. 'A Prayer for Lazarus' took me back to every gothic, sinister tale I've ever seen or read (Frailty, 1922 as examples). Beginning with the line, "Daddy keeps Momma chained up in the barn out back," this struggle of a family coping with something so monstrous was as compelling as it was disturbing. However, the real tragedy was the wider, global event outside the farmstead and the ramifications beyond this one family's story.

'The Final Degustation of Doctor Ernest Blenheim' was like a slow-moving train wreck from which I could not tear my gaze. Darkly funny and dare I say, delicious.

'All the Clowns in Clowntown' was the standout for me. I never in my reading life thought I would care so deeply for a bunch of flappy-footed, red-nosed clowns. But I did. I was scared for them and cheering for them the whole way. More stories in that universe please!

Alayna Cole says

The short story collection Last Year, When We Were Young, by Andrew J McKiernan, shines a unique light on classic horror. The sixteen tales in the collection draw inspiration from a variety of genres and styles, with the magically humorous juxtaposed against the frightfully repulsive, but each story has something in common: they are all hauntingly clever.

Each twisted tale is striking and features an assortment of fascinating characters. From a mute mime to a woman in search of a second chance, from a teenage boy to a young country girl, the individual voice of each protagonist is expertly carried [...]

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Shawn Remfrey says

Before I get in to this review, I want to let you all know that I am not a fan of the short story. I know there are a lot of people out there who adore them, but that's not me. It's incredibly difficult to build a strong bond between reader and character within a few short pages. It's difficult to world build. It's difficult to tell a story that will make the reader think afterwards, or even be entertained. From the writing aspect, a short story is hard to write! On the rare occasion that a writer can meet all of the criteria, I normally find myself feeling shorted. If I'm bonded with the character and enjoying the world and the story, I want more! It's like opening a bag of M&M's and only eating a red one. I want them all! Give me the bag! Oh...hey...I think I actually have a bag hidden in my desk. Hang on a second.

I couldn't find them. I take donations.

I didn't love this book, and it was my fault, not McKiernan's. He actually met all of the criteria. He built a bond between character and reader. He did a great job of making them realistic as well as allowing you to empathize with them. There were key descriptors to unlock their soul. McKiernan did the same thing with the world and the story line. He gave you all of the key information you needed to feel like he'd spent chapters building and pulling you in.

Each of these stories has a clever twist to it. It's a little on the macabre side. Now, if you're just getting into that sort of thing, this is the perfect book for you to start with. There are people from all walks of life, with

all different situations, so you'll find it easy to identify. You'll find your brain twisting and bending to come to terms with the endings of each story.

The problem that I have is that I'm desensitized. When I first began reading the strange, unusual, paranormal, I would have eaten this up with a side of ketchup. As it is, because I've gone so far into the world that contains this sort of thing, I found myself able to predict the outcome of most of the stories. Now, I still enjoyed the way that they flowed and took great joy in their construction. I just wasn't finding my brain bending and twisting.

If you're just entering the world where the ironic and dark horrors lurk, you will find this book delicately disturbing. It's psychological horror for beginner to mid-level readers.

Dave Versace says

Andrew McKiernan's collection "Last Year, When We Were Young" is a fine example of a strong writer testing his limits by stretching in different directions. As you might expect from an Australian writer with a well-deserved reputation for compelling dark fantasy and horror, outback ghosts and urban nightmares are represented.

One of my favourite stories appears early in this volume: "White Lines, White Crosses" is a grimly familiar tragedy of teenage isolation, testosterone-fuelled recklessness and car culture, with a smear of the supernatural to amp up the stakes. "The Memory of Water" is haunted by childhood memories of beach holidays tinged with tragedy. And "The Haunting that Jack Built" is a classic yarn of strange and sinister goings-on in a country town.

But McKiernan shows his range with some unexpected variations on theme and setting: the Middle East appears in modern and mythological states, in "The Dumbshow", "The Desert Song", "They Don't Know That We Know What They Know" and the excellent clash of espionage, battles handed down across generations, old gods and chess in "Daivadana".

He does a creditable Stephen King-like grotesque in "The Final Degustation of Doctor Ernest Blenheim". He does old-fashioned SF horror in "The Wanderer in the Darkness". He even does a noir tragedy soaked in betrayal and cheap whiskey in "Torch Song".

But where this collection stands out is in the weird and absurd corners. The title story is a brief piece of deranged survival horror set in the aftermath of a more than usually disturbing apocalypse. But the jewel in the crown is probably "All the Clowns in Clowntown", which is perhaps a parable about surviving an epidemic or could be a metaphor for involuntary unionism or hostile corporatism, but in any case is probably the only story you will ever read about the last surviving resistance members of the clown counter-revolution.

"Last Year, When We Were Young" had a remarkably high hit rate for me. McKiernan's quality as a short story writer is consistently strong across the collection. Highly recommended.

Tsana Dolichva says

Last Year, When We Were Young by Andrew J McKiernan is the author's first short story collection and,

indeed, his first solo book. I should note up front that, once upon a time, the author and I were in the same writing critique group. What this mainly means is that I'd seen early drafts of a few stories, a long time ago, and had very vague memories of them. But I thought I should disclose that up front.

There was a decent variety of stories in *Last Year, When We Were Young*, with most of them tending towards the horror side of the spec fic triangle. (Spec fic is a triangle now. Or maybe a triangular Venn Diagram, but I digress.) Some were more contemplative and serious, while others were more... gory. One was even science fiction. Looking over the table of contents again, most of the stories have very good titles.

I found I most enjoyed the more contemplative stories. My favourites were "The Memory of Water", "White Lines, White Crosses" and the titular "Last Year, When We Were Young", although the latter is perhaps less contemplative per se. The former two stories deal with loss and death in a poignant way.

Actually, I liked most of the stories in this collection. My least favourite tended to be the most gruesome, which is reflective of my horror preferences more generally. And although I am using the term horror to describe the collection as a whole, I'm not sure the three circus-based stories (for lack of a more accurate phrase) count as horror. Certainly not "Calliope: A Steam Romance" nor "The Dumbshow". "All the Clowns in Clowntown" is perhaps more borderline since it definitely has a well executed feeling of dread to it, but on the other hand, it's about clowns. I suspect coulrophobiacs may disagree with me on that point.

I also liked "The Haunting that Jack Built" — in part for the name — and "The Desert Song", both of which were set in rural Australia and both of which had fairly traditional horror elements. I liked the Australian angle and difference between the Australia of the past and the Australia of a not-so-nice future. I also liked "The Message", which packed a powerful punch, nonetheless.

All in all, this was a pretty solid collection and I would recommend it to horror fans and fans of dark speculative fiction. With a few exceptions, there was nothing too extremely horrific in the stories and I think most of them would be enjoyed by a fairly broad audience.

~

The Memory of Water — A story I found difficult to put down. Siblings remember their departed parents.

White Lines, White Crosses — A teenaged boy and his family move from Sydney to a country town that is eerily obsessed with hooning. It was a disturbing story with a creeping sense of foreboding.

Calliope: A Steam Romance — A patent clerk is captivated by a woman playing a calliope (a steam-powered musical instrument). True steampunk set in Sydney, even more steampunky when we learn that the woman is actually an intelligent automaton. Also, points for many physicist/scientist shout-outs.

Love Death — A young man brings his new wife to a necromancer, hoping to get her back. I may be a bad person, but I found the circumstances around her death pretty (blackly) funny.

The Message — You know when you read a genre book and you know you're reading a genre book but the characters in it don't know they're in a genre book? This story made me think about that phenomenon. A woman takes a job answering a mysterious phone. Obviously, it's far from an ordinary phone and certain aspects of the past resurface...

All the Clowns in Clowntown — Surprisingly epic for a short story. In this world clowning isn't just something someone does, it's who they are. The clowns have clustered together in Clowntown, living their lives, until one day the circus comes to town.

Daivadana — a disturbing tale of a diplomat (sort of) who gets caught up in an old Tajik religion. Pretty gruesome at times.

The Dumbshow — Another story in the same universe as "All the Clowns in Clowntown", set (I think) shortly after the events of the previous story. It's much less eerie and, being shorter, a more straightforward story. Honestly not sure how it would stand on its own without the earlier background.

The Final Degustation of Doctor Ernest Blenheim — A little hard to get past the self-cannibalism. And honestly once past that it was still a weird story. As far as revulsion goes, I think it did improve as it went along.

Torch Song — The speculative element sneaks up on you in this one, but I quite liked it. A short tale, good punch. Title very apt.

The Wanderer in the Darkness — Sci-fi horror, so it automatically put me in mind of Alien. My only issue with it was a character leaving an airlock without his helmet and then not dying. Oh well.

A Prayer for Lazarus — I think I read part of this before, possibly an earlier version. Anyway, creepy story told from a young girl's point of view about her mother's descent into a form of zombie-ism.

The Haunting that Jack Built — I quite liked this story. Set in a rural, small town in the Australian 1950s, Jack builds a house while the townspeople can't help but notice women disappearing when they come to visit him. (I think I'd read at least part of this story before.)

They Don't Know That We Know What They Know — A weird story with a fitting title. Reminded me a little of "Daivadana", although it's actually pretty different in the details. A seer interrogating the dead body of a young terrorist.

The Desert Song — A sort of zombie story, set in rural future post-something bad Australia. I liked it and the ideas in it but I found it a little inconsistent.

Last Year, When We Were Young — One of my favourite stories in the collection. And it's a great title, which works well for the collection as a whole. A speed ageing plague has infected humanity and the concept is taken to its horrifying conclusion.

4 / 5 stars

You can read more of my reviews on my [blog](#).
