



Vampires in the Lemon Grove

Karen Russell

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From the author of the New York Times best seller *Swamplandia!*—a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize—a magical new collection of stories that showcases Karen Russell's gifts at their inimitable best.

In the collection's marvelous title story, two aging vampires in a sun-drenched Italian lemon grove find their hundred-year marriage tested when one of them develops a fear of flying. In "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," a dejected teenager discovers that the universe is communicating with him through talismanic objects left in a seagull's nest.

"Proving Up" and "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis" - stories of children left to fend for themselves in dire predicaments - find Russell veering into more sinister territory, and ultimately crossing the line into full-scale horror. In "The New Veterans," a massage therapist working with a tattooed war veteran discovers she has the power to heal by manipulating the images on his body.

In all, these wondrous new pieces display a young writer of superlative originality and invention coming into the full range and scale of her powers.

Vampires in the Lemon Grove Details

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From Reader Review Vampires in the Lemon Grove for online ebook

Aaron Arnold says

I haven't read *Swamplandia!*, her widely acclaimed novel, but I only liked a few of these short stories so I might not search it out, even if it was a Pulitzer finalist. I don't really have a problem with her writing technique per se - she can come up with good ways to describe things and there aren't any dumb sentences in here or anything - it's just that a lot of these stories don't end up being very interesting or compelling, with a few exceptions. All of these stories involve somewhat fantastical elements, which is fine, but the less-interesting ones read like weird workshop exercises, like "now write a story where horses are Presidents".

- *Vampires in the Lemon Grove*. A long-married vampire couple has been living in Italy and eating lemons to ameliorate their bloodlust, but eventually the wife wants to move on from their idyll and the husband struggles to cope. I thought this story was pretty bland, like you finish reading and all you can remember is "yeah, that certainly was about vampires or old people or something".
- *Reeling For the Empire*. Japanese girls are drugged with a kind of tea that turns them into human silkworms, locked up in a sort of Lowell mill/prison, and forced to spin silk for export until they learn how to take the next step in their transformation. Genuinely disturbing, and an excellent example of fantasy horror done well, especially in how emotionally deadened the protagonist was.
- *The Seagull Army Descends On Strong Beach, 1979*. A young teenager in a white trash family struggles to escape his life and get with a girl who's been sort of seeing his brother, crossed with a sci-fi version of Hitchcock's *The Birds*. I liked the emotional drama in the protagonist's life - my soft spot for stories about uncool high schoolers struggling with love and loserdom, I guess - but the "magical" part with the birds possibly messing with humanity by stealing their stuff felt like an afterthought, poorly developed and integrated with the main plot.
- *Proving Up*. The youngest son of a family struggling to settle on the Great Plains is sent on horseback to show a real glass window to the government inspector, which is the final proof needed to receive their title to the land under the Homestead Act; however, the window the father acquired under shady circumstances is attractive to other figures who live along the son's path to the inspector. The son's dreams are maybe a bit too much foreshadowing, but I liked the atmosphere of the story, and he labors under a fairly convincing cloud of dread. I also learned that the glass window requirement was a real thing, which seems really cruel to pioneer families.
- *The Barn at the End of Our Term*. Rutherford B. Hayes, along with several other former Presidents, are reincarnated as horses, and try to figure out if they're in Heaven or some sort of bizarre purgatory while they attempt to escape. I confess that the point of this story escaped me; it reminded me a bit of David Foster Wallace's stupid short story about Lyndon B. Johnson in that both stories are sort of mocking the retrospective gravitas that history awards to Presidents, but I liked Russell's more since it was so openly absurd. The ending was almost existentialist, like a Sartre of the stables.
- *Dougbert Shackleton's Rules For Antarctic Tailgating*. A veteran tailgater provides tips for cheering on Antarctic krill in the battle of life against their archrivals the whales. Short and goofy, it's hard to say much about this. The idea of people cheering on different species in their Darwinian struggle is worth at least a small grin.
- *The New Veterans*. A single Wisconsin masseuse gives massages to a returning Iraq War veteran with a strange tattoo inspired by a fatal IED incident, who responds strangely to her treatment. The masseuse is decently characterized, and I thought her struggle with the soldier's memories was unique and well-done. Maybe this story could have been expanded, but it ends well.
- *The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis*. The leader of a gang of high school delinquents torments a boy who just

moved into town and who is somehow connected to an oddly compelling scarecrow. My main issue with this story is that the narrator is not believable at all - that type of bully character would never think of describing themselves as having "pontoon loads" of relatives, or some of the other metaphors he comes up with. Also his reaction to the mysterious happenings with the scarecrow aren't very plausible either. Or the way the rest of his gang interacts with him. And his struggles with his last name are dumb. Come to think of it I didn't like anything about this one.

Jill says

Anyone who questions whether Karen Russell deserves all the accolades she is getting need only read *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* – eight imaginative and devastating stories that often took my breath away.

Of the eight, three stand out: the eponymous title story which features a married vampire couple who eschew all the old myths about what vampires SHOULD be like and satiate their thirst at a lemonade stand in Italy. “If you have been thirsty for a long time, if you have been suffering, then the absence of those two feelings – however brief – becomes a kind of heaven,” Karen Russell writes. In this – and in subsequent – stories, she manages to capture an essential and universal truth of humankind, wrapped in an unique and unusual package.

The best of the collection –in my opinion – is the spectacular second story, *Reeling for the Empire*. Ms. Russell imagines a 19th century Japan where girls are contracted as silkworm factory workers with one audacious twist: the girls themselves have transformed into silkworms, spinning thread from their own bellies. This highly descriptive story conjures up visions of today’s third world countries, where mass production trumps humanity and where humans eventually become cogs in the wheel. Ms. Russell writes, ‘We have no mirrors in Nowhere Mill, and I’ve spent the past few months convinced that we were still identifiable as girls women...it’s only now, watching the Agent’s reaction, that I realize what we’ve become in his absence. I see us as he must: white aces with sunken noses that look partially erased. Eyes inset-huge. Spines and elbows incubating lace for wings.’

Another standout is *The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979*. In this one, a teenager Nal, who plays second fiddle to his far more charismatic older brother, begins to believe that seagulls are communicating with him through talismanic articles, left in their nest. “If fate was just a tapestry with a shifting design – some fraying skein that the gulls were tearing right this second—than Nal didn’t see why he couldn’t also find a loose thread, and pull.”

Every one of these tales has lessons to offer. *The New Veterans*, slightly evocative of Jane Mendelssohn’s excellent *American Music*, focuses on a massage therapist who believes she can take away a tattooed war veteran’s pain by manipulating the image on his body. *Proving Up* is a haunting Gothic tale about an 11-year-old boy who discovers what occurs when the land owns you and the window becomes a mirror to your soul. *The Graveless Doll* of Eric Mutis is a sort of horrific mortality tale about bullying. And so on.

I closed this book in awe of this young writer’s talent. It’s a tribute to the art of invention and the power of imagination.

Fuchsia Groan says

Esta colección de relatos me ha parecido tremendamente irregular, tanto que me ha costado asignarle una puntuación en forma de estrellas al conjunto. Hay verdaderas joyas aquí dentro, empezando por esos dos primeros relatos, el que da título al libro, *Vampiros y limones*, maravilloso, plagado de reflexiones geniales, melancolía, toques de humor... buenísimo.

Del segundo, *Devanando para el Imperio*, no diré nada, salvo que cambia totalmente de tercio, y es opresivo, raro, terrorífico. Me ha recordado a Karin Tidbeck y a los relatos de su estupendo *Jagannath* y a partir de aquí, con mi entusiasmo ya por las nubes, mi disfrute se ha ido desinflando y la mayoría no me han gustado (*El establo al final de nuestro mandato*, *Reglas para hinchas en la Antártida*, según *Dougbert Shackleton*).

Laurel Beth says

Karen Russell is in heat check mode.

After the Pulitzer committee decided in 2011 that no great novels made the cut for the award (itself a pathetic heat check, the flailing of an organization disguised as stunting), Russell went ahead and planted her talent somewhere in Florida and here in this collection.

Do you think the Pulitzer committee just thought, "Naw, that *Swamplandia!* is set in America's wang. I love a drive-thru pharmacy with a prescribing NP hanging out the window like it's a Benzedrine Brew-Thru, but we cannot debase ourselves by acknowledging it even exists."

So here we have Russell, silencing the cloistered brain-trust of literary culture.

Basically, she just out-Saundered George Saunders.

Here we find teenage girls dosed in the parallel timeline to spin silk from their fingers. There are mediocre presidents reincarnated as horses, ineffectual as ever. Always the painful demonstrative formative experience, "you're a man now" breaks in the lifecycle. Sorry George. I didn't obsess over your new book to the point where I took in in the shower cause I couldn't stop reading. Your move, acolytes of Atwood and Carver.

I had to skip one story because Karen Russell has no problem lauding our greatest animals only to kill them off. It's the expression of Sedaris' *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, in which the greatest disconsolate scenarios of Raymond Carver et al. reappear in the fauna. And while my heart aches for the drunk and despair of men, when it's an elephant or a mouse I can't even continue. No logic, no lies, just love.

In the last story there appears a rabbit at the tail end, a best friend for a lonely boy. You know how that ends. It ends with me in the bed, Klonopinned to my dog, holding her teddy bear fur and whispering "*I love you, I love you, I love you.*"

Catina Martinez says

Appreciating this book was a slow process for me. I didn't always get the resolution that I desired out of the

stories, but once I allowed myself to sit back, and enjoy the creativity and prose, I actually learned to love the book. I'm a huge fan of author's who have the ability to weave mysticism into an every-day thread and Russell does this beautifully. She has an uncanny ability to tackle a myriad of genres and come across as an expert. Her writing is beautiful. I feel the need to go back and read these stories as I feel I just might get something different out of them with an additional read.

LeeAnn Heringer says

Over hyped, over rated, did not live up to my expectations.

Every one of the 8 very short stories in this collection has a wonderful premise -- vampires who thirst for something other than blood, team krill at the ice floe of Antarctica, women trapped in a Japanese factory, flocks of seagulls stealing the parts of our future we most need, dead presidents as stabled horses, etc. And the language itself is poetic and beautiful and sometimes says the most startling things, but...

The author can't tell a story for a damn, which unfortunately I require in a book of short stories. Every story is so wound up in being this little jewel like thing that you could present at a writing workshop that it forgets to have a point, a meaning, and worst of all an ending. Each one trails off into the mist, leaving you feeling like, huh? what just happened? where was this going? Confusion is not mystery, art is not the act of making things impenetrable.

Waste of a couple good hours that I will never get back.

Liam says

Karen Russell: still best taken in short doses. If you read *Swamplandia!* amidst the tide of hype, whether it's from the Pulitzer and 20-under-40 and just generally "this is a young skilled writer", and thought "this is good but I can only take so many awe-inspiring prose runs and incredible similes, plus the ending was dogshit", like I did, then this is the book for you. Russell kills it, truly. She's got the relentless line-by-line dazzle of an MFA student who actually is worth the tuition but beyond that she reaches toward something more profound about her characters and situations that in a lesser writer's grasp would be pale gimmicks. Check "Proving Up", which goes William Gass with a stark threatening 19th-century prairie setting and buttons it up with a truly unsettling ending, or the last story, "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis", about cruel kids and the fucked-up shit they realize all too late they'll have to remember doing. This motherfucker has SKILL. She's LOUSY with it. All that grant money and adulation has the advantage of letting her point this industrial-strength detail sponge and description-conveyer of a brain she's got without the interruption of what most of us are doing in our 20's, i.e. working at jobs we don't love for money that's never quite enough. I wish her the best; the usual jealousy I feel toward similar authors of my age group is lessened quite a bit by this collection. Like I said, *SWAMPLANDIA* was a real thrill, like getting my brain stoned and making it take a long hot shower, with sensual curls of phrase and a bottomless tank of 'em at that, and the calm assured trust that this, this author, she will control and direct you toward something that makes this book earn its place on your shelf and in your time. And, like I said, it let me the FUCK down at the ending. But this is her 3rd book. And it's fucking good. And I think she's getting better. And as long as she doesn't end up advancing up her own ass like so many enthusiastically feted writers, I'll read anything she makes, and then go jogging so the jealousy can disperse. #fuckyeahKarenRussell

Though to be fair, she might not want to write so much in first person 'cause an 11-yr-old Nebraskan boy in the 19th century and a Japanese half-silkworm from some horrifying alternate 20th century and an 12-year-old Jersey boy all sounding the same, with a zillion amazing images and metaphors banging around in each sentence? Hard to keep my belief dangling. Thankfully, like I said, best in short doses.

Madeline says

God damn it, Karen Russell.

She's just too good at this, guys, and it's driving me crazy. No one should be able to do what Karen Russell does - her particular brand of magical realism, where the supernatural and suburban America blend seamlessly, is like nothing I've ever encountered before. It just isn't fair that all that talent got concentrated in one person.

Vampires in the Lemon Grove is Russell's second collection of short stories - in my review of her first book, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, I complained that most of the stories didn't have concrete endings, and often stopped right when they were starting to get good. The writing was gorgeous, the settings and characters were fantastic, but the lack of closure to the stories irritated me. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* is infinitely more satisfying, with each of the stories having a much clearer beginning, middle, and end. It's still Karen Russell, of course, so the stories do tend to stop sooner than you want them to, and you sometimes get the sense that Russell doesn't know how to resolve the scenario she's set up, so she opts to leave the ending open for interpretation to avoid having to give us concrete answers. Reviewers who complain about the stories' resolutions have clearly not read *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Compared to that, all of the stories presented here are much more organized and complete, and knowing that Russell had improved made this much more enjoyable to read.

And god, guys, the stories are *so good*. There are eight in all, and the only clunker is "The New Veterans," which attempts to address the Iraq war and PTSD, and ends on a sort of treacly note. But it involves a massage therapist figuring out that she can manipulate a soldier's memories through his tattoos, so it was still pretty cool. I had three favorite stories, and they all illustrate what's so great about Russell's writing: in "Reeling for the Empire," girls who are recruited to work in silk factories during the industrialization of Japan are given tea that turns them into silkworm-human hybrids, and they spin silk in their stomachs that's extracted from their fingertips by a machine every day. "Proving Up" is about a group of pioneer families struggling to survive while being shadowed by an unknown evil. And my absolute favorite, "The Barn at the End of Our Term," is about a stable where the horses are former US presidents who have died and been transformed into horses, with all their memories of their former lives (our narrator is Rutherford B. Hayes), and it's funny until it takes a hard left turn into Emotionally Devastating Lane and stays there, and suddenly you're wondering why a story about horse presidents is making you want to cry. Such is the power of Karen Russell.

"Several of us claim to be daughters of samurai, but of course there is no way for anyone to verify that now. It's a relief, in a way, this new anonymity. We come here tall and thin, noblewomen from Yamaguchi, graceful as calligraphy; short and poor, Hida girls with bloody feet, crow-voiced and vulgar; entrusted to the Model Mill by our teary mothers; rented out by our destitute uncles - but within a day or two the drink the Recruitment Agent gave us begins to take effect. And the more our *kaiko*-bodies begin to resemble one another, the more frantically each factory girl works to reinvent her past. One of the consequences of our captivity here in Nowhere Mill, and of the darkness that pools on the factory floor, and of the polar fur that

covers our faces, blanking us all into sisters, is that anybody can be anyone she likes in the past."

Janet says

I'm not ordinarily a fan of the short story form but having read the first 2 stories in this collection, I am making an exception. Karen Russell is wonderfully weird.

The more I read, the more amazed I am. I've read 7 of the stories now. How a 30 year old woman can write this is beyond me....she must be an old soul, a brilliant old soul. I keep thinking I've just read my favorite story in the collection and then I read another one, and then I have new favorite.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I had been looking forward to this book coming out, because I loved Karen Russell's first book of short stories, *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. These stories did not disappoint! I was curious to see if there would be more set in Florida, but these span from Italy to New Jersey to the plains to Antarctica. And just as I would have expected, the stories are at times startling, amusing, and sad. I will just say a few words about each, but this is a must-read.

Vampires in the Lemon Grove - two ancient vampires try to satiate their desires by eating lemons

Reeling for the Empire - human silkworms

The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979 - maybe the seagulls are the only ones really paying attention

Proving Up - starts as a struggling farm family story, ends in a ... i can't even.... *shiver*

The Barn at the End of Our Term - dead presidents alive in horses' bodies
(actual presidents, not the band)... this one made me laugh more than any of the others.

Dougbert Shackleton's Rules of Antarctic Tailgating - Sometimes you're the whale, but you're probably usually the krill.

The New Veterans - PTSD, massage, tattoos, and what is healing, exactly?

The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis - I couldn't decide what I thought of this one. It did have the only bit I marked, because it is about a librarian:

"I think we needed that librarian to follow us around the hallways for every minute of every school day, reading us her story of our lives, her fine script of who we were."

The audio version is great, because each story has its own reader, really allowing for the differences in voice and feeling.

Vampires in the Lemon Grove read by Arthur Morey
Reeling for the Empire read by Joy Osmanski
The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979 read by Kaleo Griffith
Proving Up read by Jesse Bernstein (his accent is perfect for this story!)
The Barn at the End of Our Term read by Mark Bramhall
Dougbert Shackleton's Rules of Antarctic Tailgating read by Michael Bybee
The New Veterans read by Romy Rosemont
The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis read by Robbie Daymond

Gerry O'Malley says

If I had to summarize this collection of short stories in a word it would be "frustrating". Karen Russell is clearly a very gifted writer and several of these short stories approach masterful, but here is the problem - I don't think she knows how to finish a story. Each one of these little gems is unique and unlike any other story in the book - indeed, the style of the story varies wildly and wonderfully from story to story. Each story begins as a wonderfully weird little idea gem and Russell wraps that idea in layer upon layer of delicious prose, fleshing out the idea and creating fantastic and fascinating little worlds. With only one exception (the awful failed experiment of DOUGBERT SHACKLETON'S RULES FOR ANTARCTIC TAILGATING) the reader has a great time exploring each of the little worlds that Russell creates until the very end, when too often...nothing happens. Short stories (well, ANY story actually), is supposed to have a beginning, middle and end; the end should be some resolution to the conflict or antagonism that was created in the first two sections. Russell does a great job of carrying the ball downfield but then stops short of the goal line. As an example, my favorite story in the collection is PROVING UP, a young boy's amazing, journey through the haunted frontier of early 19th century American settlers that races along intermittently thrilling and terrifying until what would seem to be the logical conclusion is left up to the reader's imagination to decide what happened to the protagonist. After reading the last page three or four times I wanted to throw the book across the room - Russell doesn't need to make the endings of stories intentionally vague - it comes across as quasi-intellectual gamesmanship. The author draws from a deep and expressive and entertaining well of creativity to pull the reader along and set them up for a huge emotional payoff and then..."No - you are going to have to figure this out for yourselves". PROVING UP was, for me, the worst offender in terms of lack of conclusion, however THE SEAGULL ARMY DESCENDS ON STRONG BEACH, 1979 was, after a great emotional investment in the wonderfully drawn characters, another tremendous disappointment, as was the title story, VAMPIRES IN THE LEMON GROVE, which also suffered from being terminally precious and somewhat cloying. REELING FOR THE EMPIRE was probably the most bizarre and successful story in the collection - young girls are tricked into a kind of slave labor in feudal era Japan by signing on to spin silk, but in actuality, are transformed into human silkworms. Although the conclusion was not entirely satisfying, it seemed to fit the otherworldly atmosphere of the story, as did THE BARN AT THE END OF OUR TERM, in which dead US Presidents are reincarnated as horses in a stable and converse and interact as equine versions of themselves - bizarre and trippy and not altogether unsatisfactory, although disappointing. In the two most conventional stories in the collection, THE NEW VETERANS and THE GRAVELESS DOLL OF ERIC MUTIS, Russell writes fully developed characters that are identifiable and relatable and has them evolve and act logically, but again, the conclusions to these stories are frustratingly obscure and the reader is left with a sense of "Yeah - but what did any of it MEAN?". I suppose that several of these stories might make for interesting book club discussions, but I think most readers will describe the same frustrations as I do. Russell is a brilliant writer, but these stories come across as intentionally obtuse, as if Russell

realizes that the reader will be forced to create their own conclusions and/or debate the meaning of hers. Readers of short fiction will quickly grow weary of such intellectual hide-and-seek.

Zach says

This collection sees Karen Russell shift the balance between concept and narrative. While she has always handled both deftly, she made a name for herself by creating fantastical and fabulist scenarios. Those still remain, but the unreal elements of her stories seem subtler, serving to nudge the reader just outside of the possible, to let them see her deeply human narratives from a uniquely revealing angle. That's because Russell is all about what's human, even if the human is sometimes a scarecrow or a silkworm/woman or a vampire.

Despite being a writer of supreme empathy, Russell shows no hesitation in throwing her characters to the wolves. As much as she loves her characters, she loves the story more, and if something awful has to happen for the sake of the story then you can be sure it will. She's a master of the looming doom, a feeling of foreboding lurking over the horizon. The story "Proving Up," for example, is like reading a slightly surreal Flannery O'Connor.

The prose of each story, even if the styles vary, is always controlled, like each letter was set in place with tweezers: "That sun ate lakes, rising out of dead volcanoes at dawn, triple the size of a harvest moon and skull-white, a grass-scorcher." Russell has a way of crafting sentences that feel perfect without letting the reader fall into a preconceived comfort. She excels at creating new linguistic experiences, which require an investment of attention and intellect.

The most important part of this collection and all of Russell's writing is, for me, the childlike glee with which she explores her subjects. Even in stories where "glee" seems like the absolute wrong word to describe them, it's hard not to feel her own wonder at the weirdness of her subjects. With all the elements that I might quantify, it's this verve, elan, whatever you want to call it that makes *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* transcend literary expectations. These are stories that you'll remember long after most others are forgotten.

Maxwell says

Not the best collection of short stories I've ever read, but Karen Russell chooses such imaginative and unusual subject matter that the stories are quickly engaging.

Only one story in particular stands out as exceptional though, "Reeling for the Empire." It's haunting and a bit sickening, but incredibly original and should be anthologized.

I expected a bit more out of this, but sadly a lot of them were forgettable. I would be interested in picking up one of her novels because she clearly has an vivid imagination and way of capturing your attention.

Cynthia says

Russell Proves Up

“The Lemon Grove” is an inventive group of short stories. There are some real gems in this collection. It is one of those books that defy genre categorization. Russell’s style is very literary though you certainly don’t have your feet planted in the everyday world. There are elements of fantasy and science fiction and horror. Also, she has a knack for putting sentences and thoughts together in an individual way. Here are a few examples: “{She} read books and moved through the world as if she were afraid her footsteps might wake it.” “Outside of my mind I can barely see.” “He’s a rumor...he’s smoke...” These are a few examples. At a certain point I put my pencil down and just read.

There’s a winged motif running through most of these stories if, at times, only on the periphery...bats, seagulls, moths even angels. These multiple references to flying tie in with the fanciful nature of Russell’s writing. There’s also sadness. She confronts loss, unrequited love, a warrior’s battle scars, and unknown unknowable evil, evil that’s made worse for being undefined, etc. Though all these stories have merit I found them uneven. ‘Proving Up’ was positively creepy as was ‘The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis’ and ‘Reeling for the Empire’ read like an allegory. All of them were beyond normal happenings but there was something fundamentally true and human in them. The supernatural aspects in Russell’s writing reminded of Shirley Jackson. Russell’s tone often had William Trevor’s emotional intensity where evil seems to hover just outside reality. The best stories in this collection were immensely satisfying which made those that were less so seem more starkly lacking though probably if I’d encountered them elsewhere I wouldn’t have felt this so strongly. This book is an adventure.

This review is based on an Advanced Reading Copy supplied by the publisher.
(Disclaimer added as required by the FTC.)

Diane S ? says

3.5 Truly imaginative and so very well written. Some though were a little creepy even for me. Loved the first story, which is very unusual for me because even the word vampire will set me running, but in this case it did not. Open minded a bit, gave it a chance and was presently surprised. Must be the lemons. I would like to get a glimpse into this author's mind, must be such an interesting place. Wavered between 3 and 4, 3 because some of them were quite a bit out there and 4 because the writing is spectacular.

karen says

this collection only has eight stories in it compared to the ten in her last collection, so on one hand, i feel cross because i always want more from her, but on the other hand, the stories i liked, i liked a lot. but i'm greedy, and sometimes 8 is not enough.

but they are good, and i liked each story more than the one preceding it. in fact, the only one i wasn't crazy about was the second story,*reeling for the empire*, which felt like the longest story, but might not have been.

greg snatched this ARC out of my hands before i could read it, when i told him i was only reading spooky books during october, and after he read it, he told me it was spooky enough to fit my self-imposed and very strict criteria, and he allowed me to have it back. and it's true - many of these stories are a little creepy. not scary-scary, but *unnerving*. don't come here looking for true horror, but there are disquieting elements that are very pleasing.

i don't know if i am supposed to "review" it yet, because it is a long time until it is published, so for now i will just leave this little placeholder of a review, and i will probably go into more detail closer to publication date.

however.

i am hoping that in the published edition, she will have edited the text to include franklin pierce as one of the horses.

and i love how little sense that sentence makes to those of you who haven't read it.

ha

Maciek says

Karen Russell seems to have jumped out of nowhere onto the mainstream literary scene with the publication of her first collection of stories *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves* in 2006, at the age of 25. Her stories were published in *Oxford American*, *The New Yorker* and *The Best American Short Stories*. Her 2011 novel *Swamplandia!* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2012. This is her latest collection of short fiction, which also served as my introduction to her work.

Collections of short stories - sometimes I feel as if I am the last person on the planet who not only is interested in them but actually reads these things. It's as if the market for short fiction was completely overtaken by magazines, where they appear individually, and anthologies - where they appear collectively. I'm afraid that we have reached the time when volumes of short fiction by a single author are bordering on extinction, like single empty islands in the vast sea of novels. Discovering great stories is like finding a precious pearl inside an oyster. Discovering a collection filled great stories is like finding an oyster bursting with such pearls, each different from the other.

I am glad to report that Karen Russel delivers the goods in her latest collection, which an Amazon editor described as the descendant of Ray Bradbury's *The October Country*, "if that book had been written in the throes of a fever dream". The comparison with Bradbury is not entirely without justification. I read *The October Country* just after finishing this collection (review coming up!) and loved Bradbury's gentle storytelling, and his wonderful imagination. The stories in *Vampires in Lemon Grove* can be traced back to Bradbury - but then what in this kind of writing can't? What's more important are the stories themselves - they are the polished little darlings one might expect to roll out from a writer's workshop, but written by a student who spent most of their youth reading the science fiction paperbacks purchased at a drugstore (the ones which had two novels in one book were the best - when you got to the middle you could just flip it over and have a completely different story!), along with a selection of paperback westerns and horror fiction and other stuff they would stay to read up late, with eyes glued to the paper and cheeks red with emotion.

Russel's stories are imaginative and bright, and most of all feature ideas which are original and entertaining. In the title story we'll find Clyde and Magreb, an ancient vampire couple which has hunted for centuries for something which would quench their thirst for human blood; they find solace in a small Italian village, where they discover that sucking lemon juice seems to do the trick. But does it? The marriage between Clyde and Magreb is struggling, as she desires a change in their habits while Clyde prefers things the way they are - or is simply unable to change. Far from the vampire cheese we are now served so often, the story is a great opener - it's offhand and funny, while at the same time being reflective and melancholic, the well-known theme of disappointments in a long (in this case century long) marriage with a twist.

The second story, *Reeling for the Empire*, moves from sun-drenched Italy of now to feudal Japan at the height of the Empire, where rapid industrialization is seen as the only means of keeping up with other great powers, and Japan adopts the methods and exploitation of industrialized - and powerful - Western nations. An imperial agent travels through the poor, rural country, seeking young women willing to spin silk for a small salary. In this society such money would do wonders, so it's not uncommon that their fathers (the women in question have little to say) agree to send their daughters into factories far away. A story like this could easily turn into a sentimental piece meaning to emphasize the exploitation of workers (and the oppression and subjugation of women) toiling in sweatshops - think *The Grapes of Wrath* in 19th century Japan. But Russel puts her own imaginative twist on the story, which writers of literary realism would shy away from: she makes her agent "turn" the young weavers, and have them produce silk from their own bodies. A machine extracts the precious fiber from their fingers, and their lives are ultimately reduced to oscillating around this process. Like Kafka's Gregor Samsa they become something entirely different from what that they used to be, and are forced to adjust their lives accordingly. But there's a second catch here: Russel has her protagonist, Kitsune, join the factory out of her own free will, as opposed to secondary characters which were all drawn in by deceit, trickery and force. Like Gregor, Kitsune also acts as the narrator, bringing an uniquely personal angle to this story and shifting the focus to her own individual self, whereas in sentimental fiction even the most interesting protagonists always stand in for greater ideas. Kitsune's journey towards self-discovery is wonderfully done and her transformation is beautiful and strange.

Shades of Kafka are more clearly visible in *Proving Up*, which pays homage to the stories of pioneers who settled the Old West. With elements of Western intermixed with American gothic, it's the most straight-up horror piece in the entire collection. The premise revolves around the legendary Homestead Act, which literally gave away hundreds of acres of land to people who asked for it for little or no cost at all. However, the homesteaders had another price to pay: they had to fight the isolation in a remote and uncivilized parts of their country, struggle with difficult farming in seemingly everpresent drought and a very real danger of attack by various Indian tribes which weren't too happy about the land they inhabited and fought over for centuries being taken away from them by these new people - everyday inconveniences of life at the frontier. Russel sets her story in the fictional Hox River Settlement in Nebraska, and again puts her own unique twist on the well-explored topic: in order to be allowed to keep their 160 acres of land, the homesteaders need to "prove up" to the federal inspector by showing him that they have a real glass window in their house. The trouble is that there are perilously little windows or glass on the flat prairies, and three families have only one window - and plot to fool the inspector by quickly transporting it between their houses as he comes. The anxiety with waiting for the inspector and stress of dealing with the absurd and unnecessary bureaucracy is all too familiar and reminds us of Josef K's trials and tribulations, and the trial of young Miles Zegner - the best rider of the family, and the person selected to bring the window around when the inspector comes - his dreamlike, hypnotic and eerie journey through the wild and strange prairie land, seemingly without end, brought to my mind another of Kafka's great pieces - *The Country Doctor*.

There's also *The New Veterans*, a story about Beverly and Derek - a masseuse and a veteran. Beverly believes that bodies have an unique language which can be explored only by touch, and when a recent

government bill allows access for US veterans to massage therapists she meets Derek Zeiger, a troubled Iraqi vet with a beautiful but grim tattoo on his back - Iraqi landscape with an explosion of red in the center, his friend's death day. Derek is in much pain - physical and emotional - as he is unable to shed the thought that he is responsible for his death. Both hesitant at first, however they begin to lean towards one another, each for their respective reasons. Here Russel weaves a really quite beautiful story of healing and scars left by war, told like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, as Derek's stress and strain escape his body and seem to latch onto Beverly, whose desire to help others is at once selfless and selfish. The tension here is incredible despite its quiet, hushed tone, and makes it one of the strongest pieces in the collection where there are no weak elements.

There are two funnies here as well. The first one, *Dougbert Shackleton's Rules for Antarctic Tailgating* is a genuinely amusing guidebook for the world's most unlikely sport: tailgating in the unpopulated, frozen wilderness on earth's last corner, fought between Team Whale and Team Krill. It's the shortest story in the whole collection, and an amusing riff on sports commentary and absurd devotion which only sports can generate. Team Krill till I die! *The Barn at the End of Our Term* is best described as existential satire, as in it forgotten American presidents are reincarnated as horses and live their lives as such, stuck in a barn.

President Rutherford Hayes is gobsmacked when he finds himself waking up in a horse's body, but more so when he discovers that several of his horse companions are also former presidents of the U.S.A. - president Eisenhower, president Garfield, president Buchanan, president Jackson.

Is death not the end? Why horses, of all animals? Is the barn some sort of purgatory, or is it just an ordinary barn? While pondering all these questions the former presidents compete against one another for important offices, such as the Governor of the Cow Pastures or the Spokeshorse of the Western Territories. The idea is just so impossibly absurd and completely ridiculous, but Russel totally makes it work. Very cool.

There are also stories in this collection which do not deal with the fantastical at all, preferring to border on the fringe of the real and possible. Take *The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979*, where the fourteen year old Nal lives in the shadow of his handsome and charming older brother, trying to find himself and deal with his mother - a forcibly retired nurse, who has given up on life and being any sort of a guiding light for the young, lost teenager. Nal lives on the coast and roams around the beach, noticing the ominous seagulls; he decides to go and explore their nest, and discovers that the gulls have been stealing - and hoarding - various objects from local townspeople. These objects change Nal's life in a profound way, just like Russel's unique twist -not thieving magpies, but thieving seagulls!- on a classic coming-of-age, Holden Caulfieldesque story changes it from a staple and makes it her own. The closing story, *The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis*, recalls the vintage stories of Stephen King and explores the theme of school bullying and its aftermath: a group of school boys are shocked when they discover a damaged scarecrow-like doll which looks like one of their former victims, Eric Mutis - whom they nicknamed The Mutant. Inexplicably, upon seeing the doll the boys are strangled with guilt and recall Eric and his life, putting more thought into their actions and seeking some redemption. But like other of Russel's protagonist they too are lost, with nowhere to go, able only to queue for free lunch and run around the decaying streets of shanty neighborhoods, haunted by that doll which brings back the ghost of victim past.

This is a great collection from a writer with a fresh, exciting voice, one to seek out, hold on and look forward to. I can't wait to explore Karen's other collection and read her novel, hoping that she will publish more of her great stories in the near future. Thumbs up!

Michael says

I was delighted by this collection of weird and wonderful stories. Almost as sprightly as Murakami and sometimes leaning toward the flavor of Annie Proulx's gothic tall tales and encounters with supernatural in her collections on the American West.

In the title story an ancient married couple, who happen to be immortal vampires, live among the gentry immigrated to Sorrento in sunny Italy. Magred and Clyde keep up a refined banter worthy of the anti-heroes in Pulp Fiction. At the end of the day overseeing their fruit grove they take special pleasure of a daily cocktail hour with their harvest of fresh lemons. They have learned from trial and error over the centuries that certain drinks can slake their rapacious lust for blood:

We spent our honeymoon hopping continents, hunting liquid chimeras: mint tea in Fez, coconut flurries in Oahu, jet-black coffee in Bogota, jackal's milk in Dakar, cherry coke floats in rural Alabama, a thousand beverages purported to have quenching properties.

But we learn with a bit of comic flair that there are challenges keeping a marriage fresh for so many decades. And we let loose with some dark garnish in the cocktail that assures us that no simple psychochemistry can really tame a vampire's natural ways. Fun and spooky at the same time.

A few elements of the situation of my favorites can give you a perspective on the range in these stories while revealing a convergence on a marriage of the comic weird and spooky weird:

In *The New Veterans*, a massage therapist for veterans of the Iraq War with PTSD becomes obsessed with helping a survivor of an IED attack who has the story tattooed on his back. In apparent homage to Bradbury, the relationship between the tale she draws from the man has a changing relationship with that in the tattoo. I love how the therapist narrator's own story gives her a vested interest in healing this man. Just as a reader is changed by grappling with different takes on a story, I got some zings as I channeled her struggle to deal with varying interpretations of the man and his tattoo while neither seemed to hold to a clear pattern.

In *The Barn at the End of Our Term* we get the daffy scenario of the spirit-minds of dead presidents relegated to an eternal horse farm. Nice opportunity to explore what presidents from different eras would have to say to each other. In a situation where all stripped down to a limited channel of being in the present, where all accomplishments of the past become a matter of historical memory or assertion, and the future kind of frozen and fuzzy.. Which president do you figure would get most wound up to escape somehow (and God knows to where)? A whimsy you can get carried away with, at least until the imaginary solidity of the ice gets thin.

Among amazing but somewhat less favored stories:

- one women in Imperial Japan are trying to escape them enslavement as factory workers who not only spin silk, but produce it from their bodies like silkworms
- one that features seagulls which are getting involved in messing with the fates of some teenagers in New Jersey
- one that tracks the odyssey of an 11-year old boy while on a humanemission for his wheat farmer father in 19th century Nebraska, one beset by phantasms of his dead sisters growing out of the ground and visitations from farmers who came to a bad end
- one has some brutal school bullies of a kid with epilepsy experience a Stephen King kind of comeuppance
- another one that turns the fight between species in the Anarctic regions into a fantastical and comic international sporting event

I am not deeply experienced in the ways short stories do their magic. I tend to feel short-changed and hungry for a fuller arc about the characters and their story. But collections like this begin to help me appreciate the

microcosm of each story, with world building that takes the deftness of crafting a ship in a bottle. And the sense of a window view that implies much that goes beyond the frame. I felt a lot of cleverness here that was more playful and mind-bending rather than smug and profound.

Roxane says

Just couldn't get into this one. The stories really struggled with narrative momentum. The title story and the second story are both very good. Then things... wane.

Alena says

Given my absolute love for Aimee Bender, it seems that Karen Russell should be a perfect read-alike. She too throws reality out the window if it gets in the way of her storytelling. She invests her characters with strange powers and physical deformities that defy natural laws. She writes strong women and young people and skewers traditions and politics effortlessly.

But, I have to be honest, I came to this collection with a bad taste in my mouth from *Swamplandia!*, which was decidedly underwhelming for me.

Now I think I might be a convert. This collection started slow for me, with the title story leaving me cold, but it just kept getting better and now I can't stop thinking about it. I still don't know how to classify her writing – is this magical realism? modern fantasy? satire? I'm not sure, but I don't really care. I know that I was entertained and turned inside out and forced to allow my brain to travel down new paths.

I am still, in the words of my friend Diane, "creeped out" by the story in which young Japanese girls are transformed slowly into silkworms. What I at first took for a sort of political satire turned into an emotionally powerful story that left me reeling at the end.

In fact, often times throughout the stories, I was arrested by the rich subtext beneath her bizarre tales. The final tale could easily have suffered the route of a bad horror film. Instead she get to the core of lonely, frightened boys playing at acting tough.

"I hadn't known you could feel so grateful to a friend, for living in fear with you. Fear was otherwise a lonely place."

Russell possesses such a gift for evoking setting that I had no trouble shifting from Italy to Japan to an inner city playground. Once you accept her odd, interesting, imaginative worlds, it's much easier to find the humor and truth in her characters.

"Under what circumstance can you imagine sleeping with me? Global apocalypse? National pandemic?...What if we do it immediately after I'd received a lethal bite from a rattlesnake so you could feel confident that I would die soon and tell no one? Can you just quantify for me, in terms of beer, what it would take?"

These stories span the globe, many different eras and a variety of socio-economic conditions, but at their heart, they all investigate lonely people in search of connections.

I think I am now ready to go back and read her first story collection and keep an eye open for whatever she has in store for us next.
