



There are Little Kingdoms: Stories

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Kevin Barry received widespread critical acclaim and the Rooney prize for Irish Literature following the publication of this first book of stories in 2007. His stories have since appeared in The New Yorker and in the Granta Book of the Irish Short Story. His debut novel, City Of Bohane, was published by Jonathan Cape in April 2011. Could easily have been titled These Are Little Masterpieces'. Barry gathers all the bewildered exasperation that Irish playwrights from Tom Murphy to Marina Carr and Enda Walsh have identified, and brings it, most brilliantly, to his dark, blackly hilarious and horrifically realistic narratives.'-Eileen Battersby, The Irish Times

There are Little Kingdoms: Stories Details

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From Reader Review There are Little Kingdoms: Stories for online ebook

Stef Smulders says

These stories are little artworks. You need to read them slowly, closely, as the author has chosen his words very precisely. It is not the action that drives the narrative, but the descriptions.

‘Atlantic City’ is a kind of example of what life in a small countryside village is like for its youth, and also how it will develop, generation after generation without fundamental change. Well told, with some flashes of genius, for example when the girls enter the boys’ arcade: „They had vinegar in them and they roved their dangerous eyes around the habituees and they were a carnival of cheap perfume on young skin ...”. But James, the leader of the pack, has the better of them: „His hungry gaze asked severe questions of their confidence...” until later on „Though the girls had become shyer, shyness can fold in on itself and be transformed on a summer night: when there is possibility in the air, shyness can say what the hell and trade itself for a brazeness.”

‘To the hills’ is a story of inevitable loneliness at middle age, when this has even seemed to become preferable to a relation. It is the fate of certain peoples’ lives. Unforgettable are the lines „... the slow hours of the afternoon yawned and presented themselves with a certain belligerence. Those who go mad go mad first in the afternoons.” And how about the humor in naming the guesthouse the St Ignatius of Loyola B&B?

‘See The Tree’ is a bit weird, as it remains unsaid what happened to the main character before he lost all memories. There are some hints, that’s all. Meaning of the title? Amusing story nonetheless.

‘Animal Needs’ is the opposite, elaborate and explicit, with the exception of the daughter maybe who only makes an appearance in the last paragraph. Magnificent description of the desolation of (Trump?) country life, where even gods get depressed: „There are crisis levels of debt. There is alcoholism and garrulosity and depressive ideation. There is the great disease of familiarity. These are long, bruised days on the midland plain. People wake in the night and shout out names they have never known. ... There is addiction to prescription medications and catalogue shopping. Boys with pesticide eyes pull handbrake turns at four in the morning and scream the names of dark angels. Everybody is fucking everybody else.”

‘Last Days of the Buffalo’ is a short sketch of another soul lost in life. „... it happens sometimes is that pain becomes a feed for courage, a nutrient for it: when pain drips steadily, it can embolden.” The main character has a trait in common with some of the ones of the other stories: he needs routine to stay (mentally) sane. „He has before him the consolations of routine.”

‘Ideal Homes’ is a funny story about two rebellious female adolescents in yet another deadly boring village. The blind shopkeeper who needs the client to tell him what they chose to buy „...is as close the village got to an attraction.” The girls steal from the shopkeeper of course and roam around the village to annoy as many people as they can.

‘The Wintersongs’ observes the (non)reaction of a young girl to a chatty half mad lady seated opposite of her in the train. As in an earlier story (the daughter in Animal Needs) the main character is the one that does not say a word. The author concludes (with regret?) that „She doesn’t know that every step from now on will change her. She is so open, so fluid. Every conversation will change her, every chance meeting, every walk down the street.”

'Party at Helen's' is a kind of relay in which the story is taken over by a new character (all youngsters) if he or she meets the current narrator at the party where the story is located. This presents Barry to display one of his major skills: very concise character description. „She was born to middle age, and a lascivious one: all solace was in the senses.” „She was intuitive: she had an idea of the vast adult dullness that loomed around the next turn.

'Breakfast Wine' is my favourite. It is only a description of a bar scene but done with exquisite detail. Every word in this story is right on the dot. „The clock considered twelve and passed it by with a soft shudder, as though it had been a close call.” „... the dread of the morning had lifted, we passed the hour of remorse, and we marched to the mellow afternoon.” „... the days were slow in The Northern Star, and the nights were only trotting after them.” „We nodded, the three men, sombre as owls. We nodded as though the cruel variables of love were hardly news to us. ... Oh what we wouldn't have given for broken hearts.” This story is a real gem of the genre.

'Burn the bad lamp' is again about a disillusioned middle aged man with psychological problems. He is constant on the alert for dangerous mood swings which he tries to check with tried homemade simple methods. „He knows that 'perceived slights' is one of the key danger signs...” Surprisingly enough, the story develops in a kind of fairytale, unlike all the other stories.

The title story starts off with a magnificent first paragraph: just read it! The narrator has a range of surreal experiences and it is left to the reader to judge what causes them. Psychological conditions, drugs, drinking?

'Nights at the Gin Palace' is a rather hilarious story about an old resigned father and a manic, hysterical daughter who has failed in everything she has tried in life. Now she wants to start a hotel. „She had some handsomeness still but it was turning into something else. She had moved from city to city, and from town to town, propelled by a talent for hopeless optimism.”

'The Penguins' is hilarious as well, relating the survival of airplane passengers that landed in uninhabited territory. „My husband is like one of those second-hand books you buy that's got all the wrong bits underlined.” The funny thing is that a few of the passengers are characters from the earlier stories.

Finbarr says

If I was to base this on the first half of the book, it would be five stars for sure. Barry is undoubtedly my favourite writer of this generation. His turn of colloquialism, his acerbic humour and the manner in which he captures the mundanities and quirks of small-town Ireland so perfectly are all present across all his books.

Coming to this, his first collection of short stories, after having read everything else he's written, you can see that he is in some ways raw. The first few stories are perfect and among the finest I've ever read. Some of them, I've read a few times over, revealing new adventures in language on each occasion.

Perhaps the book could've lost a few of the stories towards the end... the title tale for one, in a bid to tighten up the quality. But as it is, this is more evidence for the brilliance of Kevin Barry, the writer of our times.

Ray says

Exceptional collection by a master of the short story. Full of humor and amazing prose, with hapless odd-ball characters dropped into fascinating situations they can't extricate themselves from, and the settings and towns in which these dramas play out are artfully described. I also loved his most recent collection, *Dark Lies the Island* and intend to reread it this year. I have yet to read *City of Bohane*, but a copy is on its way. Too, I need to reread *Beetlebone* and remind myself why I gave it 'only' 3 stars. I recall being somewhat disappointed, but I failed to write down the reasons why.

Excerpts from *These Are Little Kingdoms*:

Opening paragraph of the first story, 'Atlantic City':

A July evening, after a tar-melter of a day, and Broad Street was quiet and muffled with summer, the entire town was dozy with summer, and even as the summer peaked so it began to fade. Dogs didn't know what had hit them. They walked around with their tongues hanging out and their eyes rolling and they lapped forlornly at the drains. The old were anxious, too: they twitched the curtains to look up the hills, and flapped themselves with copies of the RTE Guide to make a parlour breeze. Later, after dark, the bars would be giddy with lager drinkers, but it was early yet, and Broad Street was bare and peaceful in the blue evening.

From 'Animal Needs':

Madge was handsome but crazy, and he didn't need any more distractions. There was already the situation with Noreen. There was also the situation with Kelli Carmody at the sports centre, though that was most definitely over. Kelli was nineteen, for Christ's sake, and they are unpredictable as snakes at that age. He had changed the hours of his workouts to avoid her, and he fully intended to continue doing so. There is only so much a man's heart can take. He was still getting over Jenna. He knew whenever he saw her at the till in Lidl that he wasn't full over her yet. And Yvonne, too. Yvonne Troy was a heartbreaker. So no, there would be no more messing, there would be no more situation with Madge. Even if she did have legs that went up to Armagh.

From 'Last Days Of The Buffalo':

Foley closes his hand softly around the boy's hand then and a cold quiver passes between them. It's the feeling in the hazel switch when it divines water, and it's the feeling that comes at night when a tendon in the calf muscle has a twitched memory of a falling step, and it's there too, somehow, in the great confluence of starlings, when they spiral and twist like smoke in the evening sky. Foley holds the boy's hand and the feeling sustains for a single necessary moment.

I?ja Rákoš says

Kevin Barry is a remarkable writer. I've been to Ireland twice on trips that lasted days and never strayed outside Dublin, but his rendering of the nether regions of the Emerald Isle, of the fortunate and not-so-fortunate who inhabit the place and the detritus of their lives gives me the sense that I was born and raised nowhere else. The language so fine, the cadence so easy, Barry's fictionalized (one does wonder, though) stories from the margins are the purest cocktail of fractured joy and flawed beauty. And set in Ireland, these stories enter the realm of escapist literature for most of us, and with the added benefit of nary a wizard or a

wormhole in sight.

It's Barry's evident love for the place that grabs me. Despite the aching desperation of the lives he chronicles, the appeal to know these people is irresistible. The teens who frequent Moloney's Arcade with the pinball machine that croaks out "ATLANTIC CITY. FEEL THE FORCE!" with each new high score. A hillwalker who lectures his love interest, Theresa, a newcomer to the sport, on the merits of a good Goretex boot while lying naked with her in bed, having not had sex. And her vodka slogging friend Marie who may have been the better choice in this odd love triangle. And all these people in the glottal mouthful that is the town of Clonmel: "*The bus was quiet, with just a handful of sad cases thrown here and there, the elderly and the infirm, the free-pass brigade with their jaunty afflictions.*"

The loneliness, the imperfect hopes for a hand to touch, a friend, and even for magic. The anti-Facebook world. The uncoolest, saddest, though not manipulatively so – lives you could ever imagine WANTING to read about. The world's discarded, lost, in a land of mossy, damp Catholic imagery, and yet, a race so remarkably, inevitably blessed, so enviable.

I'm one of those tireless Tom Waits devotees, and I have wondered about Tom's inexplicable appeal to non-English speaking Europeans – but that appeal somehow helps me understand the draw of Kevin Barry to those of us with little true sense of Ireland, and little literary interest in swords or sorcerers. I know nothing, nearly, of the place. But in everything I've read by Barry so far, within a handful of sentences he has taken me there, set me down none too gently at a soggy bus stop in some provincial town and dared me *not* to want to stay.

A deeply gifted writer and rare, natural storyteller.

Kevin says

This isn't the most memorable of short story collections I have read in the last month. I felt many of them were lacking in any focus or point which as a result made me tune out more often than I'm willing to admit. This may be ignorant of me but I just didn't see the purpose of some of the stories. I enjoyed some of the characters and their interactions but in comparison to others I have read, it isn't as effective.

Kathryn Guare says

This collection of short stories by Irish author Kevin Barry provides the rare combination of something beautifully written and highly entertaining. Poignant, wistful and at times hysterically funny, it has treasures on every page. The author has a talent for capturing the rhythms, slang and charming turns of phrase that are somehow unique to the particular brand of English spoken in Ireland, and the enjoyment of that alone is reason enough to read it. Be warned, though, Barry's characters are not pulled from the cast of "Waking Ned Devine." They are authentic, small-town strugglers and sinners, and their lives are portrayed accordingly, in lovingly vivid detail.

Daniel Polansky says

I really like Kevin Barry. City of Bohane really tickled my sweet spot, a nightmarish urban fantasy with the tightest literary chops, and these rambling collection of short stories about an Ireland not seen on Aer Lingus commercials, is top notch. He has a fabulous ear for dialogue, his stuff is very funny without seeming false, you can sort of imagine his cast of low rent drunks and club drug ridden teens talking in the way they talk. The prose altogether is pretty fabulous, there are about a million throw away line I really wiped my brow over. Liked this a ton, check it out. But check out John's book first.

Alan says

lovely book of stories, almost sketches really and some may find their thirst for plot and closure and such like unquenched. I'm not bothered by all that, I just enjoyed the character studies, the drinking, the folly, the (hard won)resignation, the thwarted sexual desires. Just like real life. More later (and some quotes). I know I'm falling behind on my reviews... I will catch up..

.. here's a bit more:

It is set mostly in small town Ireland (Galway is mentioned in one), but there are a couple (at the end) not – one set in Cumbria, another on an ice floe where passengers from a plane that has a forced landing have to line up. But mostly they concern farmers, or farm labourers (and not prosperous farmers: *Meadowsweet Farm is put together out of breeze blocks, barbed wire and galvanised tin. The land is flat and featureless. There are sawn-off barrels with rancid rainwater. A snapped cable cracks like a whip and lifts sparks from a dismal concrete yard - the electrics are haywire. The septic tank is backed up.. There is a general sensation of slurry.*), pub workers, dreamers, students, losers. Everybody's had disappointment. They are mostly 'realistic' but one of the stories features a (cynical) genie and another someone who can tell futures from touching palms. Somehow these excursions beyond the real only serve to make the people and their fate more grim, not less. Often there is a glimpse of what could be – the glamorous woman who stops off in the delapidated pub who seemingly appreciates the slow afternoon of drinking, and the woman in England who proposes to turn the ramshackle family home into a mini-hotel and has invited a TV makeover programme to come and film it, much to the disappointment of her resigned father (*Wifeless ten years, at large in the ancient house, prey to odd shudders in the small hours, Freddie Bliss had more or less given up on the idea of sleep. Subsequently he had gone a little daft*). You soon realise that the makeover may not go as smoothly as planned.

Good stuff, I'm going to look out for his novel now.

Callum McAllister says

Had one or two really great stories that I will remember for a while, but overall just a decent collection about (mostly) small-town Ireland. He obviously has a great knack for description and imagery -- particularly the kind that sort of anthropomorphises everything to have human emotions, anxieties, psychological states and so on, which I just love. I also think that the characters were really fleshed out and had a lot going on -- lots of brimming tensions and the like -- which would make him a great novelist. So, I will probably pick up

some of his novels.

M. Sarki says

This title came to me heavily amped by Gordon Lish. He had instructed me to read a short story placed by Kevin Barry in a recent *New Yorker* magazine, which I did, and which I thought was OK, but nothing that would make me want to read an entire book of these short fictions. But I bought the book anyway, and I also bought the one novel he wrote just in case Mr. Lish was on to something the rest of the world would one day climb aboard on too and I could make a buck or two on selling a first printing. Lately I have been reading so many good books and having a rather lot of fun doing so. But I took a quick peek at the first story *Atlantic City* and was wowed by its language and dialogue. If the rest of the book were to continue on at this level of quality I would have been so amazed. But it is easy to bet that I wasn't. Hard for an entire book of short stories to flat knock me out unless the writer's name is Raymond Carver.

However, the first two stories are worth putting the cash down for the purchase of the entire book. The character James in *Atlantic City* will stay with you for a very long time. At least he is still with me weeks after the fact. Brilliant piece. Pinball wizard who talks personality, walks personality. Big fellow. A character unlike any you have ever met. The language and story in the second offering *In the Hills* is also done nicely and is basically about a boy hiking a bit with two quite different girls, staying overnight in a B&B before heading back down, and the choices offered when it came time for a possible pairing up for that evening. But looking back even now I would say that even that story wasn't so hot. The first one is, however. One of the best tales I have read in some time. *Atlantic City*. I say find the story somewhere online and just skip buying the book. That is my thoughtful advice. As a whole, *THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS* is not what is has been cracked up to be. It is proof that Gordon and I don't always agree, but still our relationship endures.

Zoya Yousuf says

Why this book can't open? I can't read this. Such a shit.

Elaine says

This is my review for The Short Review.

Reading Kevin Barry's collection is like finding a shiny two-pound coin in a pile of muck. It brings unexpected pleasure. Not just because he gives you priceless glimpses into the lives of individuals in a small Irish setting, but also because it's one of these collections you literally cannot finish in one sitting. It sent me into spirals of associations, memories, and universal contemplations. Double-takes of pure aesthetic admiration of prose. And bleats of laughter at the scrapes his characters get into (here, I'm specifically referring to *Animal Needs*, where one lust-soaked farmer winds himself deeper and deeper into a fandango -- an erotic dance -- with wife-swapping neighbors).

The characters in Barry's collection comprise, *inter alia*, a young buckaroo at the top of his billiard game, two fast girls looking for trouble, a lonesome hillwalker, an amnesiac, a genie with wry humor, a gigantic taxi-driver, an antique collector, a contemptuous air steward.

Rendered in lilting Irish brogue, what struck me is how often these characters are on aimless journeys, destinations unclear. The amnesiac who finds ownership documents in his duffel bag for a chip shop, surprises himself with his own porn collection (See the Tree, How Big It's Grown). The incessantly talkative old biddy (The Wintersongs) riding a bus gives us a glimpse of her young fellow passenger at the crossroads of abandoning an old life and seeking a new one. Even the four corners of a felt-lined billiard table become a metaphor for trippyness, a purposeless ride of sorts, until the bright young star himself is vanquished in death.

One more thing. Barry's power of description is awe-inspiring. Nothing soporific about it. It's not sentimental, but it contains lushness. It makes you believe there are little kingdoms invisible to the eye. "And Broad Street was on fire. The last of the evening gave out in a show of dying golds and reds. The street lamps came on. The blue flicker of television screens could be seen behind terraced windows. The summer night announced itself, with its own starlit energies. It brought temptation, yearning and ache, because these are the summer things." (Atlantic City)

If there's anything to fault, it's the light plotting hand Barry wields – often, these stories feel like character sketches; it leaves one craving – I would have liked to stay longer with any of them. Party at Helen's actually reads like a series of shifting character point-of-views and tantalizing profiling. The last couple of stories in the collection are also weaker by comparison – the title story itself, There Are Little Kingdoms, is a dip into an unstable wino's mind. But that's all there is and I can't help wishing for more.

Even so, this will be a rewarding read for the prose aesthete, for those who admire robust narrative voices, and for the enthusiast of the common and the strange.

Bart says

This is a collection that comprises a number of good stories, a number of very good stories and two stories - "Animal Needs" and "Last Days of the Buffalo" - that are simply sensational.

Kevin Barry is innovative a user of the English language as we have currently at work; he writes the language according to an almost aural tradition that allows him to choose lyrical sounds and invent words if need be. A pair of examples of his prose:

The creek dwindle to its outflow, and the estuary has an egginess, a pungency. The lethargy of swamp gives way to the slow momentum of the Shannon. From across the water, the hills of Clare look on unimpressed. You would be a long time impressing the hills of Clare. (p. 58)

and

Dan'd be down the Dock Road, doing a string of bars and getting knee tremblers off fast girls in behind chip shop walls. (p. 59)

Neither "egginess" nor "(knee) tremblers" is a word in the sense of Webster's Collegiate, but both are perfect in their contexts, and neither is forced in that context, and most importantly of all, neither context is force-fed its word; at no place in either sentence does one get the sense Barry had egginess or knee tremblers sitting in a moleskine, underlined, awaiting the sentence with which he might showcase its cleverness.

Kevin Barry is an extraordinary writer, and we are lucky to have his work to enjoy.

Zak says

This collection of short stories by Irish writer Kevin Barry was a pleasure to read. The writing has a kind of magnetism and dry humour that kept me effortlessly interested but thinking back, I can't recollect more than a handful of stories that were memorable. At the beginning, I was sure I had latched on to a 4-5* star book, but as it progressed, the stories themselves became less and less remarkable. However, it did end with a good one and overall, the reading experience itself was an enjoyable journey. [Final rating: 3.75*]

Sheena Lambert says

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It will be on my 'currently reading' list indefinitely. I have read it all, but I intend re-reading it on a regular basis over the summer. If you found City of Bohane a little tough going, but enjoy Kevin Barry's style of writing, you will LOVE this book.

Anyone with an interest in writing short stories should regard this book as a sort of textbook/Bible.
