



The Dead Fish Museum

Charles D'Ambrosio

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“In the fall, I went for walks and brought home bones. The best bones weren’t on trails—deer and moose don’t die conveniently—and soon I was wandering so far into the woods that I needed a map and compass to find my way home. When winter came and snow blew into the mountains, burying the bones, I continued to spend my days and often my nights in the woods. I vaguely understood that I was doing this because I could no longer think; I found relief in walking up hills. When the night temperatures dropped below zero, I felt visited by necessity, a baseline purpose, and I walked for miles, my only objective to remain upright, keep moving, preserve warmth. When I was lost, I told myself stories . . .”

So Charles D’Ambrosio recounted his life in Philipsburg, Montana, the genesis of the brilliant stories collected here, six of which originally appeared in The New Yorker. Each of these eight burnished, terrifying, masterfully crafted stories is set against a landscape that is both deeply American and unmistakably universal. A son confronts his father’s madness and his own hunger for connection on a misguided hike in the Pacific Northwest. A screenwriter fights for his sanity in the bleak corridors of a Manhattan psych ward while lusting after a ballerina who sets herself ablaze. A Thanksgiving hunting trip in Northern Michigan becomes the scene of a haunting reckoning with marital infidelity and desperation. And in the magnificent title story, carpenters building sets for a porn movie drift dreamily beneath a surface of sexual tension toward a racial violence they will never fully comprehend. Taking place in remote cabins, asylums, Indian reservations, the backroads of Iowa and the streets of Seattle, this collection of stories, as muscular and challenging as the best novels, is about people who have been orphaned, who have lost connection, and who have exhausted the ability to generate meaning in their lives. Yet in the midst of lacerating difficulty, the sensibility at work in these fictions boldly insists on the enduring power of love. D’Ambrosio conjures a world that is fearfully inhospitable, darkly humorous, and touched by glory; here are characters, tested by every kind of failure, who struggle to remain human, whose lives have been sharpened rather than numbed by adversity, whose apprehension of truth and beauty has been deepened rather than defeated by their troubles. Many writers speak of the abyss. Charles D’Ambrosio writes as if he is inside of it, gazing upward, and the gaze itself is redemptive, a great yearning ache, poignant and wondrous, equal parts grit and grace.

The Dead Fish Museum Details

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From Reader Review *The Dead Fish Museum* for online ebook

Tony says

THE DEAD FISH MUSEUM. (2006). Charles D'ambrosio. ****.

This was a fine collection of short stories or essays by this author. His plots and characters are unique in that they don't come from any particular segment of society, but all remain apart from it. It seems that the author had the knack of meeting these atypical characters wherever he went, and managed to strike up a relationship with them in a short time. I suspect that each story represented a true episode in the author's life. It would be hard to believe otherwise. I have read one other work by this writer, and continue to be impressed by his skill with words. In the hands of another writer, the stories would have to be classified as weird. In the hands of this writer, we are soon swept up into his world, and all seems normal.

Larry Bassett says

It is always chancy to pick out a book that has a title that you do not understand. If it is a book of short stories, it can be especially dangerous since the title is probably only connected with one story.

The Dead Fish Museum was published in 2006 so my aged brain classifies that as "recent." Then I think, "Is eight years ago recent?" and I think, "Maybe not recent."

The dust jacket of this book is a black and white photograph of old fashion typewriter keys but instead of letters, the keys contain the title of the book. Strange to have the image of an old fashion typewriter on a "recent" book.

He rolled two sheets of paper into the novelist's Olivetti, typing the date and a salutation to his wife, then sat with his elbows on the workbench, staring. He wondered if he should drop "Dear" and go simply with "Theresa," keeping things businesslike, a touch cold. Whenever Drummond opened a machine, he saw a life in the amphitheater of seated type bars, just as a dentist, peering into a mouth for the first time, probably understood something about the person, his age and habits and vices. Letters were gnawed and ground down like teeth, gunked up with the ink and the plaque of gum erasers, stained with everything from coffee to nicotine and lipstick, but none of his knowledge helped him now. Drummond wanted to type a letter and update his wife, but the mechanic in him felt as though the soul of what he had to say just wasn't in the machine. He looked at the greeting again and noticed that the capital "T" in his wife's name was faintly blurred. That sometimes happened when the type bar struck the guide and slipped sideways on impact, indicating a slight misalignment.

These snippets are from *Drummond & Son*, not even the title story. About a man who owns a typewriter store and works with his twenty-five year old mentally disabled son. In this one, a young man comes to pick up his renovated, ancient typewriter.

When the kid came over, he could hardly believe it was the same machine. He typed the words everyone typed: "now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their – "
"Is it 'country' or 'party'?" he asked.

"I see it both ways," Drummond said.

He wrote up a sales slip while the kid tapped the keys a couple of times more and looked down doubtfully at the machine. There was something off in its rightness and precision, an old and familiar antagonism gone, a testiness his fingers wanted to feel. He missed the adversity of typing across a platen pitted like a minefield, the resistance of the querulous keys that would bunch and clog. Drummond had seen this before. The kid wasn't ready to say it yet, but half of him wanted the jalopy touch of his broken Olivetti back.

"It's different," he said.

I can tell that this is a marvelous book. Can't wait for the title story! Here is your spoiler for this review: (view spoiler) Not much of a spoiler, right? But it gives you a sense of the tenor of the book: a little wacky.

Here are some internet diversions:

Excerpt from the book: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/boo...>

NY Times review: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/boo...>

Author interview: <http://quarterlyconversation.com/the-...>

Fine if you skipped those for the time being, but you will want to come back to them eventually if you really want to think about this high class book. As it says on the bookflap: "A must read for everyone who cares about literary writing." Believe it! It says so right on the inside back flap of the book! Alfred A. Knopf would not shit you!

When you read a used book, you find out how many people turn over the corner of the page to mark a spot. It's a lot!

I was afraid that this book was going to be a downer. It was not although it delved into some down situations. In this case, I think the book jacket got it right:

Many writers speak of the abyss. Charles D'Ambrosio writes as if he is inside of it, gazing upward, and the gaze itself is redemptive, a great yearning ache, poignant and wondrous, equal parts grit and grace.

I spent the book looking up with a bit of awe and glad for the perspective. Four stars easily.

P.S. The final story is titled *The Bone Game*. Someday someone will have to explain that story to me. I think it was quite surreal and fun but I am not sure what it all meant. Or how the ashes of a 99 year old grandfather get mixed with spawning salmon in the Pacific northwest.

Melki says

I don't know why I didn't like these stories more. Technically, they are perfect little masterpieces. And yet...

The stories seem to be missing a certain spark, for lack of a better word, that lifts them into the category of amazing, or at least, memorable. It took me six days to read this book and when I was finished, I flipped

back to the first story. I could not remember a thing about it.

Most of the stories drop off into nothingness: no real endings, no resolutions, no lessons learned by the characters.

Maybe it's just that this book pales in comparison to the last short story collection I read - North American Lake Monsters: Stories. Those stories were not as well written, but they were imaginative, entrancing, and most importantly, full of life.

This one?

Not so much.

Andrew says

A wonderful collection of short stories that evoke emotions as rich and different as the worlds represented -- from Kalona, Iowa to New York City and Seattle.

My favorite passage, from the story "Blessing":

"My ideal life is a quiet one. I like to read, to sit still in the same chair, with the lampshade at a certain angle, alone, or with Megan nearby, and now and then, if I'm lucky, I'll come across a lovely phrase or fine sentiment, look up from my book, and feel the harmony of some notion, the justice of it, and know that everything is there. That's life to me, those privately discovered moments. I wouldn't settle for less, yet I don't expect a whole lot more, either."

This book is full of such private, lovely moments.

Mircalla64 says

il museo minimalista della sfiga e dei sopravvissuti a essa

antologia minimalista di marcata impronta americana, i protagonisti sono persone che hanno avuto problemi e sono sopravvissuti, ma non sono più tornati a essere come prima, la malattia mentale, l'abbandono, la prigionia, la droga, sono tutte cose da cui non si torna indietro o almeno chi torna non è lo stesso che è partito

racconti densi, ma non cattivi, lievi nel sottintendere e un po' gravi nel suggerire un'evoluzione più triste che avverrà fuori scena, dopo che il sipario è calato e il libro è stato riposto sullo scaffale...i tormentati scivolano via, ma le loro derive restano annidate in un angolo, come grani di sabbia dura attaccata alle ciabatte dopo una passeggiata sulla spiaggia...

Jeff Friederichsen says

D'Ambrosio is a short story master. Characters and relationships are revealed gradually in their complexity, and served with a degree of tension and unpredictability that never goes over the top. Excellent collection, without exception!

Alessia Scurati says

Ho ufficialmente un problema con un tipo di storie che raccontano l'America profonda.

Ho anche un problema con D'Ambrosio, ma non è colpa sua. Quando si parla della sua scrittura, immancabilmente vengono citati echi di Moody, Carver o Chechov. Non sono una fan di Moody, a Carver ho sempre preferito Cheever e Chechov non l'ho mai sopportato se non come drammaturgo. Non mi piace proprio.

Penso, in fin della fiera, che il mio problema davanti a D'Ambrosio riguardi la gestione della rabbia. Ogni racconto, ogni storia è pervasa da situazioni potenzialmente esplosive, che non esplodono mai. Tutta quella rabbia repressa e quella violenza repressa, quella disperazione repressa. Fanno venire i nervi a me.

Elaborazioni personali a parte, sono dei gran racconti, fatti di una scrittura densa e spietata.

Però, mi sembra sempre che alla fine mi manchi qualcosa.

Il contrario dell'amore non è l'odio, è la disperazione.

A me avrebbe fatto piacere un po' di odio in più, forse.

Lo spartiacque alto ***

Drummond e figlio **

Sceneggiatore ****

Su al Nord *****

Lo schema generale delle cose ***

Il museo dei pesci morti *****

Pregiera *****

Il gioco delle ossa *****

Christine says

A friend of mine raved about this collection. She absolutely RAVED about it—to the point where I became rather suspicious. Could it be THAT good? She kept telling me to read it.

So of course, in my stubborn way, I decided to NOT read it right away. I mean, no one tells me what to do and what to like!

But I finally did pick up the book, a year later. And fell in love with the stories and D'Ambrosio's writing. These are complex, complete stories—the characters so intricate, the writing both ruthless and compassionate. The level of detail he provides (and the eye for the right details) is amazing—I'll have to pick apart each of the stories later, see where he goes deep and where he hangs back, and try to learn that perfect balance between the near and far. In terms of themes and such—they somehow remind me of Mary Gaitskill's stories in the way they show the dark side of humanity.

Chris says

Two pages into the title story I was awed and ready to fall in love with this whole collection, and then...it didn't quite happen.

Dark, distantly mystical stories about porn carpenters and floods on the Skagit river that are cryptic as hell and set in places I've lived...what's not to like? But I guess for all their promise these stories were more admirable than affecting -- they gave the feeling of "damn, wouldn't THAT be fun to puzzle over in a sterile academic environment" rather than the feeling of "I have just been hit in the heart with a horsewhip." Cause, y'know, it's that horsewhipped feeling we all hunger for.

Paola says

Protagoniste dei racconti di D'Ambrosio sono le vite dolenti, incompiute, fallite, mancanti di una più parti vitali dei protagonisti (un bambino, una coppia che ha appena comprato una casa, una coppia di tossici che vivono d'espediti, un giovane ereditario alla morte del nonno, il marito di una donna stuprata da giovane e che da allora non ha mai avuto un orgasmo, lo sceneggiatore con disturbi mentali...)

I personaggi sono fissati in un presente fatto di piccoli o grandi avvenimenti (la visita di parenti, un ricovero in ospedale psichiatrico, in viaggio...) che rimandano alle sofferenze destinate dai vuoti delle loro vite. C'è una ricerca di senso ma più che altro ci viene raccontata una rassegnata accettazione dell'impossibilità di un cambiamento.

La prosa di D'Ambrosio è semplice e limpida, quieta vien da definirla, ma come dei ciottoli gettati nella tranquilla superficie di un lago, i racconti fanno nascere dentro di noi increspature di senso che si allargano sempre di più.

Ho chiuso la lettura provando quel senso di perdita e di vaga nostalgia che si vive quando un libro ha la capacità di produrre echi e risonanze dentro di noi che ci portano lontano e in profondità. Cosa rara, purtroppo.

Ah il titolo. Il museo dei pesci morti. Che strano titolo mi son detta.

A pag. 184 si scopre l'arcano.

Orsodimondo says

IL CONTRARIO DELL'AMORE NON È L'ODIO MA LA DISPERAZIONE

Ogni volta che si parla di racconti, si tira in ballo Carver.

Un po' come ogni volta che si parla di adolescenza, subito spunta Holden, e ogni volta che l'argomento è la memoria ecco apparire Proust.

I personaggi di questi racconti sono stati abbandonati, sono vittime, sono uniti dalla malattia, sono alla deriva, senza riscatto, senza rivincita, inseguono qualcosa che non hanno mai posseduto – si muovono in un'America provinciale degradata dolente e dura che ha perso fiducia. D'Ambrosio la descrive così: *È un paesaggio bellissimo pieno di angoli marci, treni arrugginiti, case diroccate. È una terra di ottimismo e false promesse, di speranza e disperazione.*

Sono pagine dove, anche senza violenza, armi, o sangue, si costruisce un senso di attesa e una tensione che sembra potrebbe esplodere da un momento all'altro. Una sensazione magnifica per il lettore.

Mi piace molto la definizione che ho letto, D'Ambrosio un Cechov muscolare.

D'Ambrosio scrive quel genere di racconti che ti fanno pensare che un romanzo è solo una storia sfilacciata e tirata per le lunghe – ti spegne un po' il cervello come una serie tv, non te lo tiene sveglio attivo e allenato come un bel film.

A dire il vero, più che di brevità parlerei di densità.

Questi racconti sono molto belli, e per quello che ne capisco, ha ragione chi lo sostiene, tra queste pagine, Carver si sente. Eccome se si sente.

Mi piace leggere...e ogni tanto, se sono fortunato, incontro una bella frase o un pensiero ben espresso, alzo gli occhi dal libro, percepisco l'armonia di una certa idea, la sua giustizia, e capisco che il punto è tutto lì. Per me la vita sta in questo, in questi momenti di scoperta privata. Non mi accontenterei di qualcosa di meno, ma non mi aspetto neanche tanto di più.

Mia moglie non dice la parola frigorifero tanto bene. Deve imparare ancora. Lo dice: 'il museo dei pesci morti'.

Jacob says

Garp's way with a story was to find one he liked and read it again and again; it would spoil him for reading any other story for a long while. When he was at Steering he read Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" thirty-four times. He also read D. H. Lawrence's "The Man Who Loved Islands" twenty-one times; he felt ready to read it again, now.
(John Irving, *The World According to Garp*, p. 90)

I'll never be a reader like T. S. Garp--I've read about 1300 stories in the past three years. Late in 2008, I realized I owned a lot of short story collections that I hadn't read yet (I blame Barnes & Noble's summer and winter clearance sales, coupled with my own frugal belief that collections of a writer's work offered more for my money than a single novel did--crazy, I know), so I started reading 'em.

I usually read one or two short stories per day, one collection at a time (occasionally overlapping with the longer ones), all neatly recorded on a spreadsheet (hey, I'm a nerd), I managed to get through 25-30 in 2009 and '10, with a projected goal of 42 for this year. So--I read a lot of short stories. Still haven't tried Conrad or Lawrence, but there are the expected greats (Cheever, O'Connor, Greene, Lovecraft); there are wonderful surprises (Louis Auchincloss, E. W. Hornung, Thom Jones, Chris Offutt, Breece D'J Pancake, and I'm going to stop now because there aren't any female short story authors on that list and I'm embarrassed...), and then there are...the bland ones.

The Dead Fish Museum is one of the bland ones. Or maybe it's just me, because everyone else seems to like

it. Or maybe it's Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, because I tried reading D'Ambrosio's stories in the middle of a Sherlock Holmes marathon, and reading about the ordinary lives of ordinary people between stories about the great Victorian detective was a really bad idea. Either way, this collection didn't work for me. It wasn't bad (or was it?), but it didn't work for me. But it might work for you, because I have a copy to give away to interested readers in the Yew Ess Ay (because I can't be bothered to fill out complicated forms or pay international shipping), so...any takers?

Jan says

god, he's good. i loved his essays in "orphans" and here, without the journalistic, semi-autobiographical element, the stories come somehow even more alive. it's as though these characters are being written by their own subconsciouses (if that's the plural); it's like getting to know them from the inside. of course everyone is incredibly damaged, has come back from death, watching their loved one suffer, self-inflicted burns, sitting in dirty bathtub water...it's an intense, at times bleak, literary world here. and yet somehow kinda sexy. i love it. reminds me a little of early denis johnson (jesus' son). he writes complicated women well, too, which is hard to do (esp. for a man?). i've always heard that d'ambrosio is a "writer's writer" -- never quite knew what that meant, but now it makes sense. he makes it look easy.

Francesca Maccani says

Questa di D'Ambrosio è una raccolta di racconti potentissimi. I protagonisti sono persone che hanno avuto problemi e sono sopravvissuti, ma non sono più tornati a essere come prima, la malattia mentale, l'abbandono, la prigionia, la droga, sono tutte cose da cui non si torna indietro e, chi torna, non è lo stesso che è partito

Racconti densi che suggeriscono un'evoluzione più triste che avverrà fuori scena, dopo che il sipario è calato e il libro è stato riposto sullo scaffale...i tormentati scivolano via, ma le loro derive restano annidate in un angolo, come grani di sabbia dura attaccata alle ciabatte dopo una passeggiata sulla spiaggia...

In questa raccolta, D'Ambrosio ci conduce per mano attraverso un'umanità dolente, in cammino verso una destinazione che per molti rappresenta un'incognita. Un'umanità che, come dice il personaggio di uno dei racconti, "non poteva fare altro che vivere la sua vita, proprio come me e come lei".

Sono uomini soli quelli che abitano questi racconti, uomini che sotto le vesti di un'apparenza come tante nascondono ferite mai rimarginate, uomini che si portano dietro un dolore difficile da dire e (forse per questo) impossibile da condividere.

D'Ambrosio racconta queste storie irrisolte in maniera onesta, senza ricorrere a trovate e colpi di scena, affidandosi unicamente alla forza della trama e ad una scrittura lineare, precisa, raffinata e ricca di immagini e suoni.

Il secondo racconto dal titolo Drummond e figlio è una delle cose più belle che io abbia mai letto. Qui l'autore tocca picchi di bellezza stilistica che è raro incontrare.

E poi lui, è un grande, anzi un grandissimo. Una persona eccezionale che sintetizza talento e umiltà.

Carl R. says

The title story of this volume is, obviously, “The Dead Fish Museum,” but the D’Ambrosio story that resonated most with me was “Drummond & Son because of a conversation that took place at the Tin House conference last July. During a panel discussion, D’Ambrosio and Joy Williams got into a rather extended exchange about where you could find the best typewriter repair shop--in the country. Both of them still use these antediluvian devices, and things being what they are, need to get them serviced, and the opportunities for such are, of course, limited. Though there are many more than I’d imagined. The discussion brought to mind Annie Proulx’s remark that she writes in longhand and writers who don’t are lazy. Which harks back to Eugene O’Neil’s dilemma when a nerve disease robbed him of the ability to write in longhand simply couldn’t create any more. Some kind of kinesthetic synapse had been destroyed and he couldn’t tap into his author-brain.

I enjoyed the days of the manual typewriter myself. Lots of aggression got funneled into that old red Royal, which stood up to many years of abuse without flinching. However, I willingly gave it up for this electronic gadget that doesn’t require me to insert fresh paper and start a page over or twist open the Wite-Out every time I make a mistake. Maybe if I’d stuck with the Royal, I’d have written and published something notable by now.

At any rate, D’Ambrosio makes admirable use of his Olivetti. The aforementioned “Drummond & Son” does refer to the name of a typewriter repair shop. Drummond is the proprietor, having learned the business from his father, and he does have a son. But the son is mentally ill, a twenty-five-year-old who suffers various delusions--some dangerous to himself, some merely inconvenient to others--and cannot live on his own. The mother has left, unable to carry the burden any longer. As in many of his stories, D’Ambrosio scatters humor in the midst of painful situations, even one as hurtful as this, and you don’t feel the characters are trapped, hopeless, despairing even while they struggle.

Take another example, “Screenwriter,” about a man who has checked himself into a mental institution (He’s got plenty of money from all the blockbusters he’s penned), and obviously belongs there. He maneuvers a pass and visits a woman who has just been released (God knows why), one who burns and cuts herself. He’s horny, but things don’t work out in that department, and he stays to console and be consoled. Strange, but believably comforting in the end.

You might think from these two examples that mental illness is one of

D’Ambrosio’s things, and you’d be right. Even in situations where characters aren’t certifiable, as in the above, they often skirt the borderline. And he puts them in a wide range of geography (NYC, North Woods, West Coast) and situations. Take the title story, about a guy who’s about to commit suicide, but takes on a job to help build a porn movie studio while he’s trying to work up the courage. Or the couple, just out of rehab and obviously brain-damaged from drugs (at least she is), who travel the country taking contributions for an organization that purports to help drug-addicted babies. That one’s about charity and near-death/afterlife experiences. There are a couple of sterling family dramas also--“Up North” and “Blessing” in particular.

This is first-rate, inspiring writing by an established author of unsurpassed ability and accomplishments. Keep pounding on that thing, Charley. It works for your writing and for my reading.

