



Jenny and the Jaws of Life: Short Stories

Jincy Willett, David Sedaris (Foreword)

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In these wonderfully funny and poignant stories, Willett's eccentric, complex characters think and do the unconventional. Soft, euphonic women gradually grow old; weak, unhappy men confront love and their own mortality; and abominable children desperately try to grow up with grace. With a unique voice and dry humor, Willett gives us a new insight into human existence, showing us those specific moments in relationships when life suddenly becomes visible.

Critically acclaimed when it was first published in 1987, *Jenny and the Jaws of Life* is being brought back due to popular demand. It's a timeless collection filled with a certain freshness and wit that ring just as loudly today.

Jenny and the Jaws of Life: Short Stories Details

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Author : Jincy Willett , David Sedaris (Foreword)

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From Reader Review Jenny and the Jaws of Life: Short Stories for online ebook

Sarah Hine says

I picked this up because in the forward, David Sedaris explains how he considers this book a true gem which helped shaped his own literary voice. Using basic logic: I love David Sedaris. David Sedaris loves Jincy Willett. Hence, I will love it too. And I did love it. Not because it made me burst out laughing while riding the train to work (which is why I love Sedaris), but because it had so many great turns of phrase, twisted and rich plot lines, and disturbing but absorbing characters. Willett's writing and sense of humor is dark, very dark, and you can really see where Sedaris might have drawn from it in creating his own style. This is excellent short story writing.

Susann says

A dozen years after my first reading, I still think this is an excellent collection of short stories. My 2004 review probably would have been more glowing than this one. But if I seem tepid now, I think it's due to the timing of this re-read and how the mood of the stories wasn't quite what I was looking for.

According to my paper book journal, my favorite story in 2004 was "Justine Laughs At Death." This time it was "The Haunting of the Linguards."

Last read: 03-12-2004

Nitya says

I recommended this one to my book club after reading about David Sedaris' rave review of this book, which was actually first published in 1987, and then resurrected and reprinted after Sedaris wrote about how much he loved the book. Being a big Sedaris fan, it seemed logical that I would love Jenny and the Jaws of Life. Have you ever invited someone to watch a movie that you absolutely loved, and then watched it with them, wondering the whole time, if really the movie wasn't that great after all? I felt like that while reading this book, knowing my book club members were reading along, and probably wincing while doing so.

What was Sedaris thinking? He thought the stories were hilarious, and touching. While I thought the stories were interesting, I found very little humor in them, and I have a pretty good sense of humor.

As for being touching, I don't think so either. It is possible, that were I reading the book without having convinced my book club to read it, that I would have seen it differently. As it was, the one book club member who did like the book was absent the night we met, and everyone else strongly disliked it.

Complaints ranged from the stories were depressing, to it wasn't funny, to it was just plain weird.

I will probably peruse Jenny and the Jaws of Life again to see what is what. Curious what other reviewers have said. Maybe I'll read several and see.

Rachel says

The 13 short stories in this collection are witty, well-constructed, contain beautifully written passages, and Willett shows a lot of insight into human nature; nonetheless, I disliked this book a lot.

Originally published in 1987, it was reissued in 2002 with a new introduction by David Sedaris, who is quoted on the cover as saying, "[i]t's just the funniest collection of stories I've ever read," which, if true, could mean that all the other collections he's read are autopsy reports. It's neither here nor there, as I don't think these stories -- which are about teens killing their parents, adultery, rape, false accusations of child molestation, cancer, and a guy who feels like he would have made an excellent Nazi -- were intended to be funny, but it still seems like an odd thing to say. In fact Sedaris's entire introduction is odd; the gist of it is that in the 1980s he would read literally anything, including manuscripts that he found left behind in a photocopier, and that of all his indiscriminate reading, this was one of the things he liked. While I think his recommendation is sincere, it reads as if it's not.

In any event, I do not recommend this book, at least not taken as a whole. Each story, individually, is very good (and I have to say that's unusual in a short story collection, which is ordinarily two or three great stories plus another 200 pages of whatever the author scraped off his or her hard drive), but when you read the entire book in one or two sittings, it's all sort of disturbing. Aside from the dark subject matter of each story, there are in general two running themes: mildly disturbed and unlikeable children who clearly will never outgrow whatever it is that's wrong with them, and dysfunctional father/daughter relationships. The latter is present in nearly all the stories, either in an actual father/daughter relationship, which is either vaguely sexual or strangely maternal but never filial, or in the marriage of a woman to a man old enough to be her father (and in the one story where the protagonist is married to a man her own age, his hair has turned prematurely and completely gray.) Mothers in these stories are more an afterthought, present but not particularly necessary. After three or four similarly themed stories, I felt like I was reading writing exercises or character sketches or, at worst, do-it-yourself psychotherapy. In any case, it was starting to give me the shivers, and I was glad to get to the end of the book.

I've read two of Willett's novels this year, *The Writing Class* and *Amy Falls Down*, both of which I liked, but they were very different in style and tone both from this and from each other, which itself is strange since *Amy Falls Down* is the sequel to *The Writing Class* and yet they read as if they're written by two different people. So the upshot, I guess, is that with Willett you never know what you're going to get. She's a good writer, so you're bound to like something she's written, but unless you enjoy feeling depressed and sort of creeped out, it probably won't be this.

Michael says

In his introduction, David Sedaris piles tons of hyperbolic praise on this collection, including calling it the funniest collection of stories *ever*, which just ain't the case. Most of the stories aren't actually funny nor are meant to be.

This is dark, self-conscious satire, of an annoying eighties vintage that feels very much of its time and the many varied collections published during that recent golden age of short fiction. But with a few exceptions, the stories here, they feel more like the work of graduate workshops--not particularly satisfying in terms of language, or wit, or story, but more like a working out of some idea that you can see and appreciate. As

exercises, in other words. Fine exercises, but pretty much never coming to life in a way that affected this reader deeply.

Olivia says

I just got this book for \$1, and already I am happy and sad about that. Why didn't I pay more?

Joshua Gross says

This was an intense collection of short stories. All of them resonated and meant something, all of them had depth and complexity, and it made it a little difficult to read at work because I'd finish one story and just have to move on to the next one without time to recover. Jincy Willet is amazing, and her stories show that. She has a perfect understanding of human nature and of human interaction.

These stories occasionally have a feel about them that is specific to that time period and that generation, the characters are well done and complicated, and once again Jincy Willet's writing make me wonder what kind of person she is.

My favorite stories were 'Mr. Lazenbee' and 'The Best of Betty.' The rest are all my second favorites.

Meghan says

This book and I had a date at the Korean Women's Spa this week. The stories I enjoyed most were the first two and then the later story told in the format of an advice column. The themes start to repeat themselves and I didn't enjoy the last two stories in the collection. Very similar in tone to the David Sedaris collection *Barrel Fever*.

LooseLips says

this is simply one of the most under recognized, hugely intense, beautifully written books i have ever read. i feel lucky to have discovered jincy willet (although david sedaris might've found her first) and recommend everyone read this book once or twice a year for the rest of your life.

Mintwitch says

I have had a good run of books over the past week or so. **Jenny and the Jaws of Life** was so good that I'm tempted to take a break from reading and revel in the goodness. Instead, I will reread **Jenny**...

Short stories are difficult. They are difficult to read and they are extremely difficult to write. Few hit the "sweet spot," the point at which there are precisely enough words to complete the idea, not a single word too

many or too few, and each perfectly suited to its purpose. Jincy Willet has a gift, hitting the sweet spot every time.

The collection is introduced by David Sedaris, who assures the reader that **Jenny...** is "the funniest collection of stories I've ever read." Mr. Sedaris is a strange man. I would not call Willet funny. There are amusing moments in the stories, but Willet's humor is not the sort that causes one to laugh out loud; instead, one experiences the shocked recognition of self, of shared humanity, our common foibles and frailties.

christa says

I have an unrequited beef with Jincy Willett that dates back to weeks ago when she wrote in the NYT's Book Review that Sarah Dunn's flaming piece of chick lit "Secrets to Happiness" was not, in fact, chick lit. This, of course, led to me researching the reviewer to find ways to extract from her the \$23.99 she owes me for lying. Unfortunately, when I can across her own list of novels and short stories, I was surprised to find that Willett's stuff looked like stuff I might want to read.

With her most recent novel "The Writing Class" in that awkward pubescent phase where it is about to morph from hardcover to soft cover, I wasn't able to find it at any of my local bookstores. I did find "Jenny and the Jaws of Life," a short story compilation from the 1980s, re-released in modern times to include a testimonial from David Sedaris on the cover. I was all "Game on, Jincy." [What a great name, by the way.:]

She redeemed herself. Tenfold.

These 13 stories suggest that Jincy Willett knows people better than people know themselves. She has an eye like a microscope fitted with a camera and shoved into a colon. She writes about those moments where you think you are just tugging a loose thread, but it inadvertently turns into a school bus crash. Her voice is quietly satiric and darkly funny. If you had lunch with her voice, split the bill, ran some errands and then made dinner, it would take until you were dicing the onions to finally wonder: Wait. Was she making fun of me?

My favorites included "The Haunting of the Linguards," the story of that perfectly-synced, super-human, couple, whose relationship crashes after the woman sees a ghost, resurrecting the only argument the couple has ever had. "Melinda Falling" starts with a man observing a woman as she takes a tumble down the stairs at a party, and immediately falls in love with this imperfect klutz; In "Under the Bed" a woman's response to being raped doesn't match the way her friends think she should respond; "Mr. Lazenbee" stars a socially awkward sixth-grade girl who thinks the wrong things are funny. She accuses her aunt of making her "feel funny," calls a hotline when her dad spanks her, and tries to seduce the school janitor. This is uncomfortably squirmy brilliance.

"The Best of Betty" was the story that really made me realize the quality of what I was reading. It's a take on the advice columnist -- Ann Landers, Dear Abby, whoever. The story is comprised of letters and responses. At first I was like "C'mon, Jincy, you can do better than this. These letters are blah." But then, but THEN, you realize that they are blah on purpose. That she is getting to the tired minutia of these columns. And then everything explodes.

I'd say all is forgiven between Jincy and me.

Erica says

This is a truly fascinating book of short stories, but if you decide to read it you probably shouldn't read "Under the Bed" just before going to sleep. And if you do read "Under the Bed" just before going to sleep, don't continue on to "Justine Laughs at Death" to try and make it better. And if you do go onto "Justine Laughs at Death", at least read it all the way through. Don't give up and try to go to sleep in the middle, no matter how early you have to be up the next morning. Trust me.

Sam says

I honestly have no idea where this book came from, but one day I found it on my shelf and decided to read it. Most likely, it was required reading for a course that we never got around to reading. Either way, I'm glad I held on to it.

There's no great way to describe Willett's style. It's humorous and devastating. I highly recommend it.

Chance Lee says

Jincy Willett's short stories are interesting in that very few of them have a clear arc, or a complete plot, instead it's just a bunch of things happen to a character, and now make something of it. I guess that's every story, when you think about it, but hers even more so. The last story, "The Jaws of Life," addresses this in its opening line: "According to Hannah, real life just happens, whereas stories make sense. When you put real life in print, she says, you show it up for the pointless mess it really is." That's what a lot of these stories feel like, real life in print.

Which is absurd, considering the stories are about a philandering wine salesman, a "bad seed" type teenage girl attempting to seduce an old man who looks like a vulture, and a woman who sees a ghost. There's a Flannery O'Connor vibe, with some of the most ghastly images like this one -- The Mango girl [a cardboard cutout], her sharp-edged hat crumpled by Pillbeam's head, splattered with Pillbeam's blood, grinned at him from the backseat. The upholstery, front and back, reeked of fermented tropical fruit -- or with Jenny, who is finally able to fall down without making a joke about it, and so she just stays there as son gets more and more embarrassed and frustrated.

And there are lots of evil children, murdering their parents or making fake sex abuse claims.

Willett sees people as wanting to save themselves more than others, even when they're in the process of saving others -- "If I didn't do it right I would be the guy who didn't save the kid. So really I was brave because I was a coward."

My favorite two stories are the first two, "Julie in the Funhouse", about a man's sister who is murdered by her own children, and "The Haunting of the Linguards." I can see why David Sedaris likes Willett. The first reads like a Sedaris essay, if one of his sisters was brutally murdered by her own children. There's emotion coupled with a humorous detachment.

But the second story is my absolutely favorite. In this one, a practical husband and wife couple with a perfect marriage (their own fight started with the phrase "Look, I don't *want* Grape-Nuts" is torn apart when the wife sees a ghost. It's like that Nicole Kidman movie, *Birth*. She knows what she saw, even though it's impossible. She can't prove it to her husband, and being Mr. Science, he wants proof, but "she had nothing on her side but experience." The two get into an interesting debate about this with a fellow married couple, and one of them points out to the husband, "What if you *had* seen the ghost? Then where would you be? It seems to me that you've put your fai in something pretty iffy, if that is all it would take to make your whole world fall apart."

But it falls apart anyway. Everything is in entropy in these stories.

Also, I have to note that these stories were published in 1987, yet they mention thigh gap ("thighs so slender there's a space between them at the top"), which I thought was a relatively recent invention.

Shannon says

The term "brilliant" is thrown around a lot, and not always accurately. But in this case, it's very apt. This is just brilliant. "Justine Laughs at Death" was downright disturbing, what with the allusions to rape, murder, and torture, and the weird bird imagery and cryptic phone calls. But very good. And "Best of Betty" was really funny. The whole thing is very witty, and I think Willitt is up there with Amy Hempel as a short-story writer who uses the minimum amount of words to their maximum awesome-potential. Also, though this collection was first published in 1987, it doesn't feel dated at all. The stories, I think, have kind of a timelessness to them. Basically, there's nothing not to like about this.

Edit: Oh wait. ONE thing. This edition had typos, for some weird reason. Like not so much spelling ones (there were like.. 2 of those, which I excused) but mostly there were frequently periods missing from ends of sentences. I could tell it was the end of the sentence because the next word was capital and it made sense with the flow. However.. it was kind of confusing. And unnerving. How can someone repeatedly forget periods?? Hm.
