

Review: All the People by Stephanie Barber (reviewed by Heather Rounds)

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All the People

by Stephanie Barber

InkPress Productions, 2015

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<http://www.inkpressproductions.com/>

When I began reading Stephanie Barber's *All The People*, I was eating a rice bowl in a Korean joint on Charles Street and outside a guy was busy jotting down notes on the cover of a paperback bible. He would glance up at the roof of the

restaurant, then back down to the bible and write something. He did it over and over. Also, a man with an eye patch and Velcro sandals pacing the sidewalk and watching what was going on across the street: twin babies getting bounced on the hips of two middle-aged women. The women were talking to the cops about something, probably the guy with the eye patch, and gauging by how the man and two women kept catching each other's stare, it all seemed like a real serious situation. So at the end of each story I was reading, I'd come back to these scenes out the window. Everything kept unfolding in the most opaque of ways, and I just kept thinking there could be no better backdrop than all these opaque ways spilling all out and around. These could be Barber's People out the window.

In her author's note, Barber describes her collection of 43 short, short stories this way: "I have been imagining these as many small novels. Hoping the spare portraits would blossom into full grown stories in the readers imagination..."

I see it—what she means: spare portraits. Each page a separate fleeting voice, sometimes in first person and sometimes in third. Each story a snatched moment of the Peoples' time. Barber gives equal attention to the voices of the young and the old and the rich and the poor and those girls who like lip-gloss and those who don't—voices laden with self-consciousness and aggression and sensuality and regret and the dragging of heavy or light daydreams or night dreams and so, so often loneliness.

Like the portrait in the frame, each story sits contained as a single paragraph tidy on its page's white space. But, beyond this smart visual these small stories are anything but tidy. These voices might be visually tucked in tight, but their internal chaos and friction is leaking and busting out at you. The paragraph of each story serves as a small stage and on these small stages the People share with us what pain throbs most heavy in the heart, what quickens the pulse, what keeps

hurt hurting and hunger for love hungering on. Or, sometimes, it's just the passing of a day on the stage. Just another swish of blood through the pumping heart. Just some lugging around of minutia as the People tell you about working the concession stand or the trouble with keeping one's focus in ballet class or that awful feeling of desperately wanting the smell of submarine sandwich out of the air mattress. In all these ways Barber gets the People to do that blossoming she hopes they will do.

Let me go back for a minute to the physical book itself, because *All The People*, as an object, deserves its own praise. If you know Ink Press then you know that the physical book—the paper and typesetting and typography that bring the manuscript to life—is something this publisher doesn't take lightly. Since 2012 Ink Press has been turning out beautiful handmade multiples, 14 total releases to date, often relying on repurposed materials (in the case of *All The People*, it's covers made of collected cereal boxes) and always staying true to the concept they conceive. One of my favorite things about Ink Press is their penchant for understated elegance and subtle pops. With this book this takes the form of a neutral colored cover, a simple graphic of an empty chair, and then a peek of the cereal box inside, making each book one of a kind.

Reading *All The People* I kept thinking of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg Ohio: A Group of Tales of Ohio Small-Town Life*, even though, admittedly, I haven't read that one in a while. I remember that book as its own menagerie of portraits; a whole complimented by its parts. Like Anderson, Barber's internal dwellings, the squawks of the heart and the gut and the head, trump plot. But while Anderson's voice comes from a single town in Ohio, Barber's come from a more elusive place. Some representation of the dark nooks, the pain of living and growing and being, of any of us, all of us.

If each story could be some small novel, as Barber suggests, then each sentence could open its own chapter. Like this sentence: “I thought if only I could have blue eyes I would get to finally, finally relax my body after about a million years of fighting gravity.” Some sentences are 4 words and some 143. These are sentences weirdly knitted; reflections on ragged, internal dialogues. Sentences swirl in their own direction, each confidently taking its own path. And like this sentence, too: “Regressing is like time travel in what you used to know or do.”

Despite how distinct each portrait is—each sentence—there is something consistent to the language of Barber’s *People*. Something steady and loose, and sing-songy. Like, the reoccurring word *cuz*. Barber’s world is one where kids and middle class women alike will take to their stage and glue together their messages with *cuz*. Barber takes on the delicate act of pushing something universal along in these stories, but not at the expense of individual voices. Tricky. Made me think, unlike when we are self-consciously saying it out loud to each other, maybe when we are all in our heads, our voices are not so far from each other, not so different after all.

And I want to make sure to note there is comedy in these pages because life is funny and Barber is funny. Comedy can be sad and sad can be comedy. It makes life better, actually. Barber has unlocked the code to all that. Sometimes we laugh at things we probably shouldn’t be laughing about. It’s horrible, but haven’t we all? There is comedy when a stripper working the day shift, gets drunk and says things like, “I just grab that weenie.” Barber reminds us, sometimes you just have to laugh.

I think maybe Barber’s heart breaks over everything and all of us. I think maybe her heart laughs over everything and all of us, too. This book feels like a well-tended to gift of that, both its physical form and what spills out from the cereal boxes. A loving gesture for all of us.

Heather Rounds