



Gryphon: New and Selected Stories

Charles Baxter

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Ever since the publication of *The Harmony of the World* in 1984, Charles Baxter has slowly gained a reputation as one of America's finest short-story writers. Each subsequent collection—*Through the Safety Net*, *A Relative Stranger*, and *Believers*—was further confirmation of his mastery: his gift for capturing the immediate moment, for revealing the unexpected in the ordinary, for showing how the smallest shock can pierce the heart of an intimacy. *Gryphon* brings together the best of Baxter's previous collections with seven new stories, giving us the most complete portrait of his achievement.

Baxter once described himself as “a Midwestern writer in a postmodern age”: at home in a terrain best known for its blandness, one that does not give up its secrets easily, whose residents don't always talk about what's on their mind, and where something out of the quotidian—some stress, the appearance of a stranger, or a knock on the window—may be all that's needed to force what lies underneath to the surface and to disclose a surprising impulse, frustration, or desire. Whether friends or strangers, the characters in Baxter's stories share a desire—sometimes muted and sometimes fierce—to break through the fragile glass of convention. In the title story, a substitute teacher walks into a new classroom, draws an outsized tree on the blackboard on a whim, and rewards her students by reading their fortunes using a Tarot deck. In each of the stories we see the delicate tension between what we want to believe and what we need to believe.

By turns compassionate, gently humorous, and haunting, *Gryphon* proves William Maxwell's assertion that “nobody can touch Charles Baxter in the field that he has carved out for himself.”

Gryphon: New and Selected Stories Details

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From Reader Review *Gryphon: New and Selected Stories* for online ebook

Rhonda says

Enjoyable stories, though he seemed to mine the same few themes over and over. My favorite story was "Gryphon."

Lisa Findley says

One of the things I liked most about *Feast of Love* was Baxter's commitment to subverting the usual way men (and male writers) deny women (and female characters) agency. One of the hard things about these stories was that several of them didn't seem to subvert at all, and a few put "empowered" words in the mouths of some women in an attempt to write full female characters, and ended up flat. But this book is a collection of stories from across many years, so maybe these are earlier ones, when he was still figuring things out.

I still can't get over how about half of Baxter's characters seem exactly like a person you'd meet, and half I don't recognize at all -- but I'm still intrigued by them.

Jane Ciabattari says

I read *Gryphon* back to back with Franzen's *Freedom* over a snowy weekend, and *Gryphon* won. Here's my NPR review: <http://www.npr.org/2011/01/13/1328701...>

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I pledged back in June 2010 to read more by Baxter, so I was happy to see this come out and be treated well by critics. The only problem with publishing a volume of new and *selected* stories is the likelihood that a fan will have read some of it before. And at least five stories were familiar.

Of the new-to-me stories, I particularly enjoyed "The Cures for Love," that starts with a woman dealing with the end of a relationship but also includes these free-association translations of Ovid, and it somehow works in a brilliant way.

Tuck says

Really really nice short stories, usa college professor style, not much cussing, but some good sex (some bad sex too, and some scary sex, and some violent sexual crimes too). Some of the things i like that author does: name checks REAL plants and trees like Catalpas and Walnuts, not just some generic "trees" ; describes cars, real cars with real brand names and their characteristics and rust patterns ; creeps, outsiders, pie-in-the-

skyers, slackers, 10 year olds, sexy cult members and more are all running around in Baxter's worlds, people you can believe in, people you have bad dreams about. This is a classic american short story collection and I'm so glad i was apprised of this author.

Joe says

"Baxter's stories summon up a haunting beauty; his is a way of illustrating the mystical connections in life."

I review Charles Baxter's short story collection, "Gryphon," in The Kansas City Star.

<http://www.kansascity.com/2011/01/15/...>

--Joe

Laurie says

Quirky and dark slices of midwestern(ish) life. I'd rank Baxter's skill with the short story just behind Alice Munro's. The more I read well crafted short stories, though, the more convinced I become that I not only don't understand the current version of the form but that I will never manage to write a successful one myself.

Joseph says

Baxter's going to be my teacher starting in a month or two, and after I read "Feast of Love" I was a little worried -- I enjoyed it, but kind of from a distance, as it never really grabbed me. Turns out his stories is really where Baxter lives, and the ones collected here span his long and impressive career quite nicely. Baxter has a love of buttoned-down eccentrics, people trying and failing to fit in a world that doesn't quite understand them. Highly recommended.

Whitney says

I found some new favorite short stories in this collection. Absolutely stunning. Just my kind of stories. Reminded me of Raymond Carver, but extended.

Ellie says

Charles Baxter's Gryphon: New and Selected Stories is another collection of the wonderful writer's short stories. Baxter has such mastery over the form; his work brings to my mind Anton Chekhov, translated not only into English but into contemporary life. But like Chekhov, Baxter creates people, relationships, and a world that extends far beyond a few pages into our minds and hearts and lives. I may finish one of his story

but the story often continues to resonate within me and unfold itself long after the book has been closed.

It is always a pleasure to read & continually reread Baxter's outstanding stories. There are never enough to satisfy me!

Rebecca H. says

A while ago I read and enjoyed a collection of essays on fiction by Charles Baxter, *Burning Down the House*, so when the publisher offered me a copy of his latest collection of short stories, *Gryphon*, I was happy to say yes. I don't remember a whole lot about the essay collection, except that Baxter argued against the kind of short story that ends in an epiphany where the main character learns a lesson or changes dramatically. He wanted stories that were more true to life and to the way things actually happen to real people. The stories in *Gryphon* are good examples of what Baxter was calling for; they are quiet stories about people you or I might know who are in familiar situations and go through recognizable experiences. The characters experience change, and perhaps they learn something, if only because something new has happened to them, but the changes are small. The stories capture a quiet kind of reality, which is matched by Baxter's calmly straightforward, carefully detailed writing.

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Brant Wansley says

I loved the title story *Gryphon* about an eccentric but captivating substitute teacher. Also, *Harmony of the World* elicited my sympathy for the struggles of two musicians whose talent is only mediocre.

Athena says

The main character of the last story in this new collection explains that he is elaborating "this story of suffering and terror" and that captures some of Baxter's project here--to understand the quiet suffering and terror of rather ordinary contemporary folks. This could be a recipe for disaster--why would anyone want to read 400 pages of suffering and terror--but overall it's not. Baxter has a keen eye and a restrained voice. He trusts his readers to make the metaphorical leaps that he sets up for us. And many of the stories refuse, by the end, the terror and suffering.

I have two complaints about this collection, one Baxter's fault and one the publisher's. Baxter too often treats his characters with an ironic disdain, so that as a reader I found myself wanting to empathize with some of the characters, but Baxter doesn't allow for it. Not in all the stories, but enough of them for this to be a stylistic choice on his part. Is it an effect of our post-modern glib attitude toward the world?

And a collection of this sort--older stories that have appeared in other collections combined with new work--benefits from a chronological arrangement, since it allows readers to consider patterns and developments in the writer's history. This collection, however, is not arranged this way. Too bad.

Wanda says

This was a selection for my book club two months ago--but I couldn't get my hands on it before this month. I do remember that it was not the most popular book amongst book club members, so I had some prejudices going in. I really didn't care for the first 6 stories, but after that I found them a bit better. Perhaps I was just getting into the rhythm of reading short fiction, or maybe they improved, I'm not sure. I am not usually a fan of short fiction--these stories would, in my opinion, just get going, I'd just get to know the characters a bit, and then they were over. And they seemed uniformly depressing--people in difficult situations, not sure how to act, sometimes behaving poorly--and no real change to be found. No redemption, no improvement in their situations or their lives. No point, really. I realize that this is probably the most true to real life, but I don't read for real life--I live that. I want to read something unlike my life.

I really struggled to finish this book, especially since the book club meeting for which I was supposed to read it was long gone.

Extremely well written, but not for me.

christa says

I believe that Charles Baxter is one of the best writers on earth. If I had to pick which one should sit at the head of the table during a gathering of my top ten, I'd probably just say "Screw it" and make him arm wrestle Haruki Murakami for honors. Let the loser carve the bird.

I also believe that Charles Baxter is the trickiest writer to write about. I decided this even before he wrote a state-of-the-reviewers address about "owl criticism," in which a book is critiqued like this:

"This book has an owl in it and I don't like owls."

This designation isn't just for the rookies.

See also: Nationally renowned publications' coverage of Jonathan Franzen's "Freedom."

See also: Citizen reviewers on Amazon.

See also: Me. Right now. On his book.

Baxter is tricky because I understand thematically what he does. I see the way he rips a slice out of a normal life and hip-checks it to just an inch from absurd, but toeing the line and swinging its arms to balance at the line where realism ends. I see that he is a clean writer. I see that he writes characters with layers that aren't even hinted at, and that if you hung out with them a bit longer you might be surprised by the contents of a refrigerator or the smell their socks have trapped at the end of the day. He pits squares versus circles and tries to make them communicate.

But I'm not sure exactly how what he does results in the chemical response it leads to. Specifically: Why do I always forget what he wrote about and only remember that it was brilliant?

Charles Baxter's writing has this way of absorbing into your skin. Setting up shop. Making a memory where you're like: Wait. Was that me making out with my boyfriend on a football field that one night, or is that something that happens in one of Charles Baxter's novels? And even when I can pinpoint it, say, "Oh, that was 'Feast of Love,' not the summer of '04," I cannot attribute any more plot points to the novel that I would

actually call one of my favorites of all time.

I've never found this to not be the case with Charles Baxter, and it rings just as true in "Gryphon: New and Selected Stories," a mix of 23 stories. Not a dud in a bunch, but flipping through the collection I finished yesterday I'm all "Oh! Yes! The one about the young couple living in what seems to be Dinkytown. The warning from the exgirlfriend. The homeless man who grants three wishes! I love that story!"

I love owls.

Faves include "Harmony of the World," in which a good musician who is not quite good enough works accompanies a singer who is good, but not quite good enough and it all ends in a very Edgar Allan Poe-ian crescendo, minus the beating heart in the wall; "Surprised by Joy," in which a couple suffers when the pace of their grief isn't in step; "Snow," about a forever student drunk drives to help out his ex-fiance; the aforementioned "Kiss Away,"; and "Royal Blue," which I loved so much that I can't remember a lick of it; "The Old Murderer," is the beginning of a friendly relationship between neighbors with dueling demons; "The Winner," in which a freelance writer is thrown into "The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."
