



Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self

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Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self offers a bold new perspective on the experience of being young and African-American or mixed-race in modern-day America.

In each of her stories, Danielle Evans explores the non-white American experience with honesty, wisdom, and humor. They are striking in their emotional immediacy, based in a world where inequality is a reality, but the insecurities of young adulthood and tensions within family are often the more complicating factors.

One of the most lauded debuts of the year, *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self* announces a major new talent in Danielle Evans.

Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self Details

Date : Published September 23rd 2010 by Riverhead Books (first published September 11th 2010)

ISBN : 9781594487699

Author : Danielle Evans

Format : Hardcover 229 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Cultural, African American, Race, Contemporary, Adult

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Didi says

I usually have trouble loving short story collections but this one really won me over. Evans has constructed each story on large than life characters that we care about immediately. I've never read short stories like that before. The stories are longer than the usual 5-7 pages and maybe that's why I had the chance to really get into each story. The themes vary from race, to women issues to family and so forth. This is definitely 4,5 stars. I'm docking it a half star because I just didn't want it to end. Evans could make separate novels out of each short story. This is a definite read for short story lovers and those like me who don't. For the latter you'll be changed by Before you Suffocate your Own Fool Self. I'm already on the hunt for another collection that will top or at least live up to this one.

Tamara says

I was excited to read this after coming across an AV Club Review calling it "a remarkable short-story collection in a good year for short-story collections." But what made me especially eager to read it was something the reviewer said that didn't sit right with me: "The biggest issue with Suffocate is that nearly every story features a similar protagonist. Evans writes this protagonist—a young African-American or mixed-race woman who's trapped between her past and a more promising future—extremely well, but when the first three stories all center on basic variations of the type, it leads to diminishing returns. Evans does feature a handful of stories with different protagonists, including a young man recently returned from Iraq and in over his head with an old girlfriend, but she's right back to her comfort zone in the next story."

I thought about this the whole time I read the collection. Without giving anything away, because I highly recommend the book (and to be fair, so did the AV Club), here is a chapter-by-chapter breakdown of the protagonists :

"Virgins" - a lower-middle class teenage girl from a single parent home in Mount Vernon, NY

"Snakes" - a bi-racial tween visiting her wealthy white maternal grandmother in Florida while her anthropologist parents are doing field work in Brazil

"Harvest" - a middle-class black Columbia student

"Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go" - a black male Iraq vet on Honorable Discharge

"The King of a Vast Empire" - a twenty something black male bookstore employee in Northern Virginia

"Jellyfish" - a twentysomething black female sculptor who is also bisexual and lives in NYC

"Wherever You Go, There You Are" - a twentysomething black female PhD student in Delaware

"Robert E. Lee is Dead" - a young black teenage girl in Virginia, on the cusp of graduating as her school's Valedictorian.

GOD EVANS HAVE YOU NO IMAGINATION? Here's the thing. Calling these protagonists "similar" because they share a few census categories does a disservice to the author's gift for creating believably three-dimensional characters with unique challenges and back-stories. It also fails to acknowledge the vast differences between these characters that have nothing to do with their shared race or gender. Moreover, calling these characters "similar" says more about a given reader's perspective than it does about this particular author's skills, since the reader is betraying an unwillingness to recognize that for every young black or bi-racial woman or man there is a multitude of stories about class, gender, identity, sexuality, family, et cetera. Evans does a beautiful job telling some of those stories but there are so, so more of them to tell.

When I reread the AV Club review after finishing the book, I was reminded of Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk on "The Danger of a Single Story," in which she challenged our culture's willingness to reduce certain groups' experiences to a single narrative. Where Adichie was trying primarily to challenge our "single story" of African poverty, the beauty of her speech is that it has broad applications. When someone finds himself saying "wait, ANOTHER black woman? I guess I can look past it" when reading each of Evans' stories, it tells me that he thinks one black woman's story would have been enough to cover them all. And that, to me, is even more reason to believe that we need to tell and hear even more.

Candace says

First, I hate short stories. Had I known when I picked this book up that it was a collection of short stories, I never would have done so. I read the second story thinking that it was the second chapter and struggled to find some kind of common thread linking it to the first "chapter". Never happened. Naturally. However, having said all this, I found that I couldn't put this book down.

I chose this book randomly because the title spoke to me. As a Parisian-dwelling-native-of-Virginia (you can take the girl out of Virginia but you can't take the Virginia out of the girl!), that title jumped out at me. This is the English of my childhood--a combination of African-American/rural white dialect--and as I read the title, I could actually hear it being said, with that Southern accent and intonation, in my head. Spooky. I found the dialogue so....so perfect, so authentic, so "there"....I felt that I knew these people. Danielle Evans succeeded in capturing the subtle flavor of Southern thinking, that unique exchange between people in the South that is so hard to put into words.

Bravo!

jo says

i found this book exceptional. do you remember when jhumpa lahiri debuted with Interpreter of Maladies and everyone went WHOA? Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self is that good, though i'll be surprised if everyone goes WHOA, because, let's face it, the readership for young African American female writers is different from the readership for young Asian American female writers. and by different i don't only mean different, but i mean *smaller*, something i invite all readers of this teensy ickle review to remedy immediately.

beside being WHOA-worthy, these two books have this in common: they pack a punch. danielle evans is less gentle about the punch than jhumpa lahiri. i read this book in a daze because i was tired, independently, and i hope to read it again sometime soon. but i was also dazed by how much these stories contain. young men and women navigating the cusp of adulthood (a process that may and often does take many more years than the designated number), with few and inadequate tools to do so, in a world they have a dated code to understand, and so so alone.

yet, aren't we all? who are the guides of our transition from childhood into adulthood? and the guides of our transition from, say, being 20 to being 40? and who are the guides of our transition from being 40 to being 70? you'd figure that, this process being, literally, a matter of life and death, we would have built a system of chaperoning, mentoring, holding, advising -- also a system in which there is room for people to rest, take long breaks, check out for a bit, find their 20s feet or their 40s feet or their 70s feet.

instead, all we have as guides, most often, is tv shows. really. that's it. tv shows. we are not only alone but lied to, everyday.

but i'm getting sidetracked. danielle evans doesn't mention (that i remember) tv shows, but she does bring up, over and over and with stunningly insight and subtlety, how woefully unprepared we all are to face the world.

this book is significantly devoid of parents. i don't think evans means to say that most parents are bad parents, but i do think she means to tell us that, often, they just don't or can't keep up (cuz no one can).

finally, a comment on the title. unlike the vast majority of short story collections, the title here does not come from any of the short stories, but from a **poem** by **danna kate rushin**, a black feminist poet. the poem is called "The Bridge Poem" and if you read it in its entirety (and i hope you will) you will see that it's about translating -- people to people, cultures to cultures -- and being really, really tired of doing so. this is not a recent poem (i'm going to guess it was written in the 80s). following a small section of it in the epigram page there are two lines by audre lorde, another feminist black poet, that go: "I do not believe our wants/have made all our lies holy."

at first, since i didn't remember who rushin is, i read the excerpt from her poem as the tired lamentation of a woman who has to deal with clueless men. but no, this is the tired lamentation of a woman who has to deal with clueless everyone. maybe the mysterious lines from the lorde poem are also about excuses for not being willing to engage in the hard work of interpreting and understanding life.

and this is how, finally, i read both epigrams *together*. as if evans, this young black feminist who writes with equal compassion about men and women, were picking up the slack and giving these old (i'm not talking about age) and valiant warriors a break and a spell. i hear her saying, "hey guys, you can get a spot of rest now. let me pick up the battle. i'm young and the world has changed. hey, it has not changed much for the better, but maybe it has changed enough that y'all can rest and let me carry on your work. i feel fresh and i feel equipped. plus, quite honestly, i'm a heck of a writer."

Roxane says

My favorite book of the year. It was such a satisfying, well-written collection with these awesome stories I keep wanting to read over and over again.

Rion says

Suffocate is a collection of short stories about the Black experience in America. Every story dealt with a sensitive and taboo subject (especially within the African American community). Virginity, abortion, and post traumatic stress disorder are just a few of the subjects Suffocate discusses.

Some of the stories (Snakes, Harvest, Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go), are spectacular. As with most short stories, you are left with a sense of longing. You're left wanting more. You NEED to know how the character that you fell in love with ends up. However these stories left you with just enough. You're able to fill in the blanks and make up your own ending (and chile with my vivid imagination I need a book club ASAP).

On the other hand, the other stories were less than desirable. Not only were the endings cliffhangers, umm they really didnt have a clear beginning. Let's see if I can explain this better.....

Ok imagine after a stressful week at work all you want to do on Saturday is chill on your couch and watch movies. You have everything in place Netflixawineacomfy sweatpantsThe first movie you watch is the BOMB! Then you pick another movie (that Netflix "suggests" of course), but something is wrong with the stream. It starts in the middle of the movie. Being optimistic (I mean the Netflix gods did say you would like this movie), you continue to watch the movie. After about 45 minutes, you are really getting into the movie. You've figured out the plot (or so you think) and can't wait to see how it's going to end. And then you get the dreaded "We're sorry you've lost connection. Would you like to try again?"

Yeah so the point of that illustration (I told ya I have a vivid imagination): Suffocate (other than the afore mentioned spectacular stories) is pretty much like that bad movie that messed up your movie night. There isn't a beginning. There isn't an ending. There is just enough of a "story" to wet your appetite and then leave you hanging.

Sooooooo *in Kevin Hart's daughters voice* who would I recommend this book to? Anyone who has a short attention span and can never seem to finish a book. If you make it to the middle of a book and then get distracted by life, or if you take years to finish a book than Suffocate is the book for you.

Obsidian says

This book has a collection of 8 short stories. These are the following: "Virgins," "Snakes," "Harvest," "Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go," "The King of a Vast Empire," "Jellyfish," "Wherever You Go, There You Are," and "Robert E. Lee is Dead."

If I have to pick my favorite short story I think I am going to have to go with "Robert E. Lee is Dead." That's because the main protagonist of that story reminded me of my school days as the "smart one" in my high school. It was tricky for me, and just like the character of Crystal though I was seen as a sort of anomaly. I was smart (straight As for all subjects, except math which was usually around a B+ depending) but since I

played volleyball and did track and field so was also considered a jock and so wasn't teased for being a nerd. Believe me I got called a nerd a lot since I liked to read and most of the time I had a book in my hands. I also started looking into Wicca culture and for a time thought I would run off and be a pagan living in the woods with nothing but books. My mother was not impressed with my plan.

"Virgins" deals with a young woman who is in that awkward stage of almost being an adult who realizes that there are degrees of being truly safe with a man. This story really made me sad. Reading about this young girl and her best friend Jasmine, who is so fired up to be grown up and fall in love reminded me of my best friends when I was growing up. I think we thought that when you fell in love or had sex for the first time with someone that automatically meant that you were grown up. Instead having sex brought its own problems, especially when you realized that the person that you thought loved you and was going to be with you forever. (5/5 stars)

"Snakes" is about a young mixed race girl Tara who goes to stay with her maternal grandmother in Tallahassee. "Snakes" actually broke my heart a little bit. You have Tara dealing with the fact that her parents are away for the summer and she is being forced to stay with her grandmother who is trying to force her to be white. Tara's hair comes up constantly in this story and her grandmother treats Tara as if she's beneath her when she compares her to her cousin Allison (also staying for the summer) and uses the threat of snakes in a nearby body of water to get Tara to behave as she wants her to. Reading the story as Tara recollects that summer and having it go back to the present day where Tara is about to graduate from law school was really good.

I think I liked "Snakes" the second best out of the short stories because it reminded me a lot of some divides I dealt with while growing up. Though both of my parents were African American, both sides of my family had mixed races as well. We had Native American, Chinese, Caucasian, and even we found out later that some of the Caucasian branches of the family tree were Jewish. Though I am light skinned, there were still day to day harassment I had to deal with from school kids and even members of my own family for being too light. I used to lay out all summer to get darker so I would fit in better. In my brain, it was not good to be light skinned and I used to envy all of my family members who were darker since they fit. The number of times I got told I looked and talked too white are numerous, and I did my best by trying to blend in as well as could be expected. Is it any wonder that I started to lose myself in books? (5/5 stars)

"Harvest" is about a college student named Angel. This story for me didn't work as well as the other ones. There seemed to be two different story-lines going on. We have Angel talking about a suite mate named Laura who ends up making a ton of money by donating her eggs to wealthy couples who want to have a baby. Then we have Angel talking about her other suite mates as well and you find out a lot about them. I think that the main premise of this story was that Laura and Angel were not that different since Laura we find grew up poor. Her latest foray into expensive clothes was new to her. I also didn't like Angel that much since she seemed to take perverse pleasure out of being mean to people. (3.5/5 stars).

"Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go" is about a young man named Georgie returning from his tour in Iraq. We find out that Georgie had a bad experience in Iraq that has stayed with him. He comes back to Alexandria, VA hoping that he can re-connect with his ex who has moved on. Georgie starts to tell white lies which unfortunately cause a bigger problem than he wanted. I felt badly for Georgie in this story. I know tons of my friends' who returned from deployment and expected things to go back to the way that they were before they left. All signs are shown to Georgie that his ex, Lanae has moved on. However, he refuses to believe it, and I think the act he does is to show that he is somehow better than the man that Lanae chooses to be with now. (5/5 stars).

"The King of a Vast Empire" is about a college student named Terrence and his dysfunctional family. I feel the same way about this story that I do "Harvest." I don't know what I was supposed to take away from it. I did find that Terrence and his sister Liddie were kind of horrible to their parents. Liddie's disdain comes from a car accident that the whole family was in when she was younger. Terrence just seems to be floating through life with no clear aim. There is another plot interwoven into this, but I don't want to give too much away. (3.5/5 stars).

"Jellyfish" is about a father and daughter who are both thinking the other one has a sad and lonely life. What I found sad is that the father, William, realizes that his daughter, Eva, is on the same life path he is and will end up alone with no one in the end if she doesn't change her ways. I thought the whole story was bittersweet and sad in the end because you realize that not much is going to change for either of them. (5/5 stars).

"Wherever You Go, There You Are" is about a woman who finds herself on a road trip with her younger cousin, visiting her ex-lover and his new fiancee. I really did feel sorry for the main character whose name I don't recall is ever said. She is dealing with a break-up and trying to figure out what she is going to do with her life. Without realizing it, I think she's on the same sort of trajectory her mother is on, though unlike her mother, she has an in-between man she always runs back to you when her other relationships end. The ending of the story really did leave me with the same feeling I got when I read, Frank Stockton's short story, The Lady or the Tiger when I was younger. The story has two potential endings I think. I won't spoil them for you. (5/5 stars)

"Robert E. Lee is Dead" is about a teenager named Crystal dealing with being smart and black in the south. Crystal, due to her being friends with one of the more popular girls at her school named Geena finds herself for the first time ever not looking in at what the cool kids do. Due to Geena, Crystal who becomes known as 'CeeCee' ends up straddling two worlds. Being in the honors/gifted classes as well as being popular. When an opportunity emerges for Crystal there is a temporary estrangement from Geena who Crystal starts to realize is on a different path in her life than she is. (5/5 stars)

I have to say that all of these short stories were so very well done. I think I have written before that those writers who can create a story with fully realized characters and manage to create a story around them is very much an art form. Not all writers that I have read are able to right short stories. I am always thrilled when I can find one that writes short stories that I enjoy to read. Ms. Evans actually reminds me a lot of Maeve Binchy. Only in Ms. Evans case, she is writing stories about African-Americans and mixed race protagonists. In Ms. Binchy's case she wrote short stories about the Irish in Ireland, or living in London or in the U.S. somewhere. I was so sad to get to the end of this collection and hope that Ms. Evans continues to write stories like these.

In the end though I rated two stories 3.5 stars, I gave the whole book 5 stars. I can see myself reading this for years to come.

Rachel León says

Some of these stories deserve 5 solid stars, others were in the 3/3.5 range so I'm giving it 4 stars. I was completely blown away by the first couple of stories and then there was a lull of good stories, but not with the intensity of the ones at the beginning--or the end. The last couple stories were amazing as well. Overall, it's a great collection and I'm in love with the way Danielle Evans writes.

Manika says

4.5

Man... the longing, the melancholy, the impossible other reality, the sense of anger, despair, the battle with your own fool self against everything else... Man, was it unbearable at time.

LillaLovesBooks says

"I didn't feel anymore like being myself was something for which I owed the world an apology."

That brilliant quote, ladies and gentleman, is from *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self*. Specifically from my favorite story, Robert E. Lee is dead. I related to this story the most, because I too felt ostracized for being the smart black girl and quiet. All of the stories were great and really made you think about life, the human condition and how our view on life greatly affects how we live.

At first I was under the impression that these were essays by different people on their experiences, until I see the "this is a work of fiction" disclaimer. I couldn't believe one person, Danielle Evans, was able to tell eight different stories that felt *so real*. Even if I personally didn't go through what each character went through, I empathized with them so greatly.

One thing I noticed in review for this book were about the endings. Yes, not every ending was clear or the story had a lot of ambiguity, but life is all about no clear ending. And you don't immediately get a happy-ever-after. You have to overcome personal hurdles before you get that luxury just like the characters in this book.

Every story in here is interesting and really makes you think about the people in your life and how the characters deals with their problems and makes you wonder: would I do that? Have I? Will I?

I was feeling, feelings reading this book! I'm so glad I gave this a chance. It's a great coming-of-age book, for all races. I'm sure many adults will be reminiscent of their adolescent or new adult years while reading.

One last thing: I had been going through a reading funk and was told to read something completely different than what I've previously read. This was my first short story book and I have to say I'm now a fan of short stories. For anyone going through a reading funk, explore all kinds of options:)

My personal faves were:

Robert E. Lee Is Dead

Virgins

Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go

The King of the Vast Empire

Jelly Fish

Wherever You Go, There You Are

I love this book! Recommended read!

Melissa says

If you, like me, have been picking books up for weeks, starting them & realizing about 30 pages that you do not care whatsoever about what is going on (*Constant Gardener* I am looking in your direction), perhaps you should give this book a try. It is scrumptious and excellent and has renewed my faith in the printed word. Thank you, Danielle Evans. Now hurry up and write some more stuff, please.

Kathrina says

Danielle Evans is like a breath of fresh air in the current offerings of short fiction. Her stories are in the here and now, told by your friends and neighbors whose voices are rarely heard. Evans has an exquisite talent at evoking the true essence of a character with just a few swift strokes. A few of the later stories (*Jellyfish*, *Wherever You Go*) tend to bog down in an overwritten explanation of an extremely grafted family tree, reading more like a diary entry than prose, but her best stories avoid telling the reader too much, and just get on with telling the story. My favorites begin the collection, including *Virgins*, *Snakes*, *Harvest*, and *Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go*.

Particularly, *Harvest* was thought-provoking, as well as tender and emotionally pitch-perfect. The narrator is a black college student; her white roommate has been making extra cash selling her eggs to a fertility clinic. Juxtaposing her experience with the narrator's unexpected pregnancy provides an intriguing perspective on racial prejudice and cultural attitudes towards the value of human life. Evans' writing is so stunning, both in tackling this unique construct, and in her swift and beautiful prose styling, I've included a favorite passage that really shows off her talent (the narrator and her friend wait together in the lobby of an abortion clinic): Laura looked panicked and terrified, too, mesmerized by the tacky not-quite-tragedy of the waiting room. I imagined (this is what we did with Laura then: we never asked, we imagined) the doctor's office she'd visited to be screened and tested and have her eggs removed. I imagined it blue, with soft music in the background and fresh flowers on the waiting-room table, next to the *New Yorker*. I imagined people smiled more and struck up conversation easily. The girls there to donate would feel kinship with Laura, and if the women there to receive were inclined to be jealous of her youth and beauty and fertility, their jealousy would recede once they realized they could afford to buy her.

Stunning stuff, and I hope more is to come.

Rod-Kelly Hines says

Short stories are interesting to me...I prefer novels, and I think that the general consensus is that in the world of fiction, short stories are not the first things people gravitate towards...

That being said, it takes a fabulous collection like this to make a reader understand what constitutes a great short story: unbelievably strong and fully realized characters placed in scenarios that test them as humans, but different from a novel in that the moment of the dramatic shift, the climactic revelation, comes just as the story ends. That to me is a perfect short story, and Danielle Evans gave me eight of them back to back. Brilliant!

Nakia says

What can one say about a collection of short stories, each one of them delicious enough to hope that they never end? I almost feel bad for only giving this book 3.5 stars (I gave the extra .5 on Visual Bookshelf, but GoodReads and Shelfari won't allow for that...I wonder why). The only reason it didn't receive a perfect score of 5? I didn't want any of the stories to end so soon, if that makes any sense. These stories should be novels!

I especially loved "Virgins", the story of two teen girls in New Jersey who, except for their burgeoning sexuality, are usually overlooked by their parents, boys, and peers; and "Snakes", filled with the summer that a biracial preteen spends with her disapproving white grandmother who is ashamed of her offspring's black heritage, ignoring her accomplishments; while lavishing attention on her pure blooded cousin who is headed down the wrong path, but forgiven because of her lack of melanin.

Danielle Evans' writing is a lovely addition to my bookshelf. I breezed through this book so quickly that I was left aching for more. I can't wait for her to give us a novel that I can really sink my teeth into.

Ron Charles says

I hope Danielle Evans is a very nice person because that might be her only defense against other writers' seething envy. At 26, this D.C.-area author has already graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, earned praise from Salman Rushdie and Richard Russo, and appeared in two (two!) volumes of "Best American Short Stories." Now comes the publication of her first collection, "Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self," eight quietly devastating stories that validate the hype. No, she's not the America's Next Top Model of the same name -- that would just be too much -- but she's captivating in a far more profound way.

Lorrie Moore, one of the country's finest short story writers, recently said that she considered the form inherently melancholy, and that's an apt appraisal of Evans's work, though her stories are flecked with humor, too. As an African American who grew up in Baileys Crossroads, she writes about black teenagers and college students -- sometimes older, occasionally male -- who live in a country still largely determined by race but tired of talking about it. The tensions of interracial dating are private now, and blacks work confidently as lawyers and professors, even as they search out black landlords who won't hassle them. The civil rights protests of their grandparents' era have settled into wry jokes and sarcastic realism.

That attitude energizes a rueful story called "Harvest" about a group of Columbia University students. These young black women see ads in the campus newspaper offering up to \$15,000 for human eggs, but they know well-heeled couples don't want their genetic material, no matter how high their SATs or how healthy their bodies. "Columbia credentials be damned," says the narrator. "If they had wanted brown babies who so obviously didn't belong to them, they would have just adopted." Even as the story appears to glide along with no more direction than the flow of dorm-room gossip, it quickly develops into an unsettling reflection on the calculus of race, sex and commerce before arriving at a moment of compromise that's as intimate as it is disturbing.

That technique, the surprising dodge of moral responsibility that casts a character into deep regret and re-

evaluation, works well in almost all these stories. The first one, "Virgins," is a deceptively casual tale of sexual initiation told by a 15-year-old girl in 1996. Evans, who teaches creative writing at American University, brings us right into the overconfident patter of these bored, anxious teens, kids who know sunscreen lotion is a white conspiracy, who know they deserve vastly more exciting lives, who know they can handle even the most dangerous situations. The narrator, Erica, resembles many of the people in this collection: She's smart but confused by the rules of teen life; eager to fit in, but conscious that she doesn't. Seeing a slutty girl at a bar, Erica says, "I wondered how you got to be a girl like that. Did you care too much what other people thought, or did you stop caring?" By the end of this powerful story, she gets a disturbing sense of just how far adrift she really is.

English teachers still assigning John Knowles's "A Separate Peace" -- why? why? -- could enrich their classroom discussion by comparing it to Evans's "Snakes." It's a rich, shocking story about a 9-year-old black girl sent to spend the summer with her wealthy white grandmother in Tallahassee. On the grounds of the estate, the young narrator cavorts with a much-favored cousin under the increasingly displeased eye of their toxic grandmother, who warns the girls of man-eating pythons in the lake. Like Ian McEwan's "Atonement," it's a story about longing and what vengeance a young girl can set in motion. You'll never experience its revelation the same way you did the first time, but it rewards in other ways on repeat readings.

Evans's greatest talent is her ability to create poignant moments of crisis in the lives of transient people who can't seem to connect with those they love. How quietly and easily the barriers between us are reinforced. In "Jellyfish," Eva waits eagerly for her father at a restaurant with the sense "that anyone could just by looking at her see that she did not belong to anyone, anywhere. . . . Where once she'd taken her self-sufficiency for granted, somewhere in a dizzying string of morning afters she had started to feel her aloneness was a mark of incompleteness, faintly spreading." And yet, when her father arrives, so eager to help her, to embrace her, he feels that "her whole life was an elaborate series of barricades against him."

If there's some tonal and thematic redundancy in this collection, it's counterbalanced by such arresting stories as "Someone Ought to Tell Her There's Nowhere to Go." Set in the Washington area, the story involves an Iraq vet who comes home to discover -- as he expected -- that his girlfriend has moved in with a new guy. Determined to behave kindly and stay in her life any way he can, he volunteers to babysit her 5-year-old daughter. And what's the harm if this little one wants to call him "Daddy"? As a story of chronic alienation and post-traumatic stress, it's affecting and sweet, moving toward a tragicomic crisis that leaves this young vet staring into the conundrum of his intractable loneliness.

Again and again, without any histrionics, but with a clear appreciation for the natural drama of our mundane lives, Evans frames such questions in a way that will resonate with any thoughtful reader.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/...>
