



Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned

Wells Tower

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Viking marauders descend on a much-plundered island, hoping some mayhem will shake off the winter blahs. A man is booted out of his home after his wife discovers that the print of a bare foot on the inside of his windshield doesn't match her own. Teenage cousins, drugged by summer, meet with a reckoning in the woods. A boy runs off to the carnival after his stepfather bites him in a brawl.

In the stories of Wells Tower, families fall apart and messily try to reassemble themselves. His version of America is touched with the seamy splendor of the dropout, the misfit: failed inventors, boozy dreamers, hapless fathers, wayward sons. Combining electric prose with savage wit, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* is a major debut, announcing a voice we have not heard before.

Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned Details

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From Reader Review Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned for online ebook

Trin says

The word I keep wanting to use to describe this short story collection is “masculine.” Customers give me weird looks when I do this. But I suppose it's still better than the other phrase I could use: “Whoa-ho-ho, hello, daddy issues!”

This is a collection all about manly men in the height of their manliness, doing manly things like hunting deer and having questionable affairs with questionable women, all while suffering from some seriously bad cases of Manpain (a.k.a. Mangst), and failing to connect with their fathers and/or brothers. It's really quite good though. Tower's writing is incisive and vivid, and these stories frequently don't go where one might expect. Nor do they just...trail off, end unresolved, like my least favorite but highly common type of short story does. The emotional stakes are high here, folks! Reading this collection *will* leave you feeling rather ravaged. And kind of like you might want to don a bunch of plaid and pose for the front of a Brawny paper towels package.

Shya says

I'll dispense with the easiest bit of criticism first: though it is the titular story, "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" is actually the only story set in something other than what I fairly assume to be present day, the only story to stretch realism. (All the rest of these stories are basically slice of life, NYer realism, with tinges maybe of hysterical realism.) I don't think this is quite fair however, this critique, seeing as how it could very well have been Tower's publisher and/or agent who ordered this collection, and chose what to include. Still, a strange choice, even considering the fact that such a title becomes emblematic of a basic kind of desperation and loss tucked deep within the characters of this collection.

As for the rest of the collection, or rather, "the book," if you go by a kind of exception-makes-the-rule perspective, there are certain things Tower is very, very good at. He's a master of the visual simile, for instance. At least once in every story--sometimes twice or three times--he comes up with something that, as a writer, fills me with that bittersweet mixture of enjoyment and envy. The kind of comparison that is at once completely disparate and yet totally right.

Another thing he's good at is creating gem-like little scenes that have the right balance of quirky, particular detail and familiar, straight description to make the reading quick and fluid yet improvisational and dreamy. The characters are invested in the scene, and bring a good measure of memory, abstraction, and analysis (though too many, perhaps, fail the kind of introspection you know Tower himself has, and this makes you wish he'd imbue his characters with more of their own).

So why only three stars? Well, basically, stars are bullshit. The short answer is I gave four stars, most recently, to Stoner, and this simply isn't that good, that mature, that wise. Tower is talented as fuck, but the biggest, most obvious shortcoming in this collection is that, for all their nimble blocking and deft characterization, the overall effect was wanting. I never felt like the primary characters had enough at stake (a terribly workshippy thing to say, really, but there you go), and though there was driving force enough simply in the language of the stories, when they ended, I felt that not enough had been accomplished. It was

really a consistent experience throughout the read, until the penultimate story, "On The Show," which basically did everything right.

Sandi says

I won this book through the FirstReads program. I love short stories and had high hopes for this collection. However, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*: Stories turned out to be a collection of utterly depressing stories about self-indulgent losers. The characters are rich guys with lousy relationships, young teenage girls who want sex with middle-aged men, carnival workers and others living meaningless lives of their own creation. Even the damn Vikings are depressing losers. "I'm so sick of marauding. I don't want to go sacking and pillaging anymore." There's no manliness there. There isn't a single moment of optimism in any of these stories and there is really only one real tragedy. The rest is just whining.

I do give this collection an extra star for being extremely well-written. I disliked it for the same reason I dislike Hemingway, which puts Wells Tower in good company.

Stephen M says

This book is floating between three and four stars.

For the most part, the characters that Wells Tower casts in his debut short story collection are pretty awful people. A few of his protagonists include estranged brothers, cheating spouses and pedophiles; never before have I felt such anger and discomfort towards characters in a story. Yes, I, Stephen M of goodreads, empathizer with the lowest of the low—am I a bad person for IDing with Humbert Humbert?—felt nothing but scorn for the people of *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*. I think if I were a writer, I would take this as a compliment. Well Wells should because it is not easy to provoke that kind of reaction from the reader. The fact that such an emotion came out of me says he accomplished a lot, but that's *not* to say that I loved every page. I don't think there's any dispute that this book is written terrifically. The prose is sharp, to the point and occasionally dazzling. Tower has a great deal of formal skill, he knows how to tell a story well, develop his characters, leaves much to the reader to divine, and blasts through the checklist that you'd find in any good creative writing class.

That being said, Tower doesn't reach nearly as far as his skill warrants. He tells small stories—in length and scope—that hardly reach beyond the interpersonal drama of two brothers and a hunting trip or an old man, a drug dealer and her apartment. His stories accumulate small flares of momentum but by the time it hits an interesting stride, the story ends, essentially killing the build-up. I attribute a portion of this to the short story format, but it is more so apparent in these stories that Tower knows how to set up a story, bring together intriguing threads yet knows little of what to do with it once that has been achieved. It seems that Tower holds himself back when another author would take a step forward, take a risk. I'm curious to hear about Tower's writing process especially w/r/t to the cuts he imposes on his material. Some of these stories were probably much broader, sloppier and unfocused—first drafts—than the final products. I'm at a point in my reading where I almost prefer an ambitious story, even if it's sloppy over a story that is safe and perfect. I'm trying my best not to pigeon-hole Tower here, because his writing is a bit more daring than I'm giving it credit for. The two stories "Retreat" and "Wild America" are downright, five-star fantastic. But with the rest of the stories I felt antsy while reading them. Most stories, I anxiously twiddled my thumbs waiting for the

story to really take off. When it finally would, the story would end.

(If you'd like to attribute all these opinions to the fact that read this cushioned between *Infinite Jest* and *V.* then that's probably fair).

I certainly understand the hype around his writing but it was not enough for me. Tower is a five star writer that wrote a couple 3-2 star stories. I think that once he becomes more confident and ambitious, we will be in for a real treat. In the meantime, I had to sit patiently through a few bores and stories that weren't all that special.

More than anything else, character is Wells' strong point. As I've already mentioned, he can invoke such a response from me solely through character. That is saying a great deal. There's a moment where a character is described so perfectly, with all the perfect detail, that it should have every writing teacher who has championed "show not tell" salivating from the mouth:

"I spotted my stepmother by the dry fountain, where she was watching some young people make a film. I left my cistern at my father's feet and jogged to her. Since I'd seen her last, Lucy had reached a new status of tiredness and age. Looking at her, 'lady' is what I thought, a word that summed up her sparse, dry hair, her mottled cheeks, her many clattering bracelets and her lipstick, an alarming coral shade leaking into fresh hairline rills around her mouth. Her right eye was bloodshot and brimming with brine. We embraced. All she wore against the chill was a lamé shawl over a flimsy black top, so thin I could feel the gooseflesh on her hard arms"

Compare that to something that a lesser writer (view spoiler) would write, "I spotted my stepmother, looking like a middle aged house wife, wearing a few pieces of jewelry". Bravo, Mr. Tower. Despite my reservations, I am downright giddy for your first novel.

(view spoiler)

Ken says

A refreshing short story collection. Not the same old MFA blah, blah, blah. Not the same old Pleasant Valley Sunday in suburbia (God help us all) blah, blah, blah, either. Instead, stories that walk the edge. Losers you love to hate and hate to love. Mostly guy stories, but a few from different POVs, too, like the teen girl who vents her anger at a cousin who steals her squeeze by striking up a conversation with some drifter who is sunning himself shirtless on a rock in the stream out in the woods (it's Whatever O'Clock... do you know where your daughter is?). That one's called "Wild America."

Then, in "Leopard," you get the kid playing hooky from school with a stay-at-home step-dad who suspects he's a fraud (and hates the punk, anyway). When Junior plays possum, he attracts a policeman and play acting turns into improv theater (loose leopard incidental).

Creepiest maybe is "On the Show," which enters the fertile and fetid turf of the Midway where a little kid gets abused in a Porto-Potty, a teenage boy takes employment after duking it out with HIS step-dad (Mom took sides), and a host of carnies contest for most-likely stereotype in the nether-parts of our imaginations.

My favorite is "Retreat." It hits some of my buttons, is why, exploring as it does the sometimes hilarious, sometimes testy relations between adult brothers (I have three). It's set in Maine, too, and features a deer hunt that turns into a moose hunt and ultimately winds up being a 12-point irony hunt. The dialogue is viciously hilarious, walking that line we call "guy love" and "withering sarcasm."

What I like best is Tower's penchant for stopping, not ending, his stories. This will drive more traditional readers crazy (been there, done that), but I like it -- especially when Tower manages to find just the right image, one that touches on an earlier thread in the story, one that leaves an impression on your cerebellum. And who says stories have "endings," anyway? O.Henry is dead. Resolutions are overrated. And real life doesn't speak French, so take your *denouement* and *baguette* it.

As with any collection, some unevenness, some variety in effectiveness, but overall, a nice run and a refreshing change. I'll be watching Tower for future releases and praying against the sophomore jinx.

Paul Bryant says

Style. It's amazing. I mean to say, we all have the same English language with its million plus words available to us, it's open 24 hours a day, you have already been given a free lifelong subscription. How is it that some writers can put selections from those million English words which are permanently available to all the rest of us down in sentence after sentence so that it becomes more (much more) than prose, it becomes style. So that you read one page and you can say -- oh, that's James Ellroy. Or Virginia Woolf. Or Philip Roth. Or Raymond Carver. Or Annie Proulx.

The critics, that gaggle of preening police informants, got it so right with this guy. They loved him, I loved him. I've been looking for a new short story genius since the sad Missing-In-Action fate of Thom Jones. Wells Tower is it.

This collection reads like it's pieces of a giant, really giant, novel which in order to twine all the pieces of lives here presented together would be like 900 pages long. So, Wells, if you're listening, do the right thing, take a few years off and WRITE IT! (Although that would kind of undermine my ongoing campaign to get the short story, the three minute single of modern literature, a little more profile.)

Because all the stories here (except one) are cut from the crazy cultural layercake that is contemporary America, the extraordinarily ordinary scenes of bad romances, sudden fights, pleasure and boredom, difficult brothers, ex-wives, stepfathers, tv, a little too much to drink, a little bit of dope, sexy cousins, places you really wouldn't want to be, and of course places you really would like to be, for a week or two at least. Wait a moment -- hasn't that stuff been done to death already by all the other short story writers (Lorrie Moore, Alice Munro, Richard Bausch, Amy Hempel, the list goes on) not to mention all the good and not so good novelists of America of the last 40 years? Well, yes, so Wells Tower shows again that you take some guitars and a bass and drums, the same old instruments that they been using since the sixties, and you can still make magic. The magic doesn't come from the guitars and the bad romances, it comes from you.

A few quotes may be in order at this point.

I was hoping I could sell the patent for a hundred thousand or so and then hurry to the Gulf Coast to cram a

pontoon boat and a big-titted stranger into the hollow places in my heart. (p70)

Jacey could not find a term appropriate for when a young girl is groaned on by a thirty-five year old lieutenant of the arts. (p158)

She and Buttons lay there an hour and a half and mashed the lozenge eighteen times. The necking got fairly grave, but nothing irreparable took place. (p163)

Well, I had this boss. I'm telling you, if you asked me for an asshole, and I gave you that guy, you'd have owed me back some change. (p176)

Stuff like that is festooned throughout these nine stories. There was only one I could have done without (the title story, as it happens, which is just a bit silly). Otherwise about half of them are going straight into the PB Hall of Short Story Fame.

Wells Tower. Highly unlikely. But it happened.

Ryan Chapman says

Tower's stories take place in the middle parts of America, which isn't to say the midwest - he takes on the bored teenagers, the divorced fathers, the estranged brothers. Except for the last two stories, "On the Show" and titular piece about Visigoths going through the motions of raping and pillaging, there's a fairly similar approach: we're invited into these people's domestic lives through their pitch-perfect verbs (what verbs! I'm telling you) and dialogue until a real sense of things is established. Just enough to let you see, and then it's over. There's often violence and climax, but rarely catharsis. As if Tower is saying the end result of such moments is not clarity, but further confusion. He's fond of putting a bunch of short-tempered people in an environment, and then, admirably, deciding to narrate from the perspective of the most deluded asshole in the bunch. His word, not mine: I'm pretty sure it shows up in every story here. Including the one about the vikings.

It must be said: Tower is a phenomenal talent. He's an absolute master at picking the right detail, just a few words, to illuminate the world. I can't wait for him to produce a novel.

Jim says

In the title story of his debut collection, "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned," Wells Tower uses contemporary American idiom to tell the story of a Viking having second thoughts about his career as a plunderer and pillager.

We've seen reluctant detectives, hitmen and superheroes but never a foot-dragging sacker of cities. It's a weirdly empathetic and altogether unforgettable tale, but once you get past the absurdity of characters with names like Naddod the Norwegian Monk and Djarf Fairhair talking like teenagers around a game of Dungeons and Dragons, the story is fairly conventional: a young man in love must choose between the safety

of the life he knows -- the perils of long sea voyages and raiding villages notwithstanding -- and the unknown terrors of raising a family.

For all the literary pyrotechnics on display in this curious narrative, the rest of the stories are surprisingly straightforward. In fact, Tower's skill at things like exposition and characterization mark him as almost old-fashioned.

The story "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" was first published in the New York literary magazine *Fence* way back in 2002. The story won the Pushcart Prize and was anthologized in "The Anchor Book of New American Short Stories" in 2004. In other words, this fresh new voice in American fiction is neither fresh nor new; and that's precisely what makes the arrival of this incredible talent so compelling.

Tower's subject? He doesn't have one. He adeptly tackles all manner of familial conflicts: father vs. son, brother vs. brother, husband vs. wife, boy vs. stepfather, in other words, the world. (It must be said that all but one of the nine stories in the collection are told from the point of view of male protagonists.) The stories are set in locales scattered across the country, yet Tower displays the authority of a regional writer:

"He crossed the cockeyed patio. Tiny lizards scattered from his path. He followed the sound of waves to the end of the yard, through a stand of pine trees, limbless and spectral. He stepped from the pines onto a road paved with oyster shells whose brightness in the morning light made his eyes clench up."

It's hard to imagine anyone, much less a literary-minded fellow, paying such loving attention to coastal Florida, but the details are conjured up so thoroughly one can almost hear the skinks scurrying for cover in the understory.

Tower brings his keen powers of observation to bear on the human form as well. In "Executors of Important Energies," a hustler's broken front tooth is described as "a tiny gray guillotine." A tall girl with too much makeup on in "Down Through the Valley" is "a bleached giraffe in tight jeans."

It sometimes feels as if there's nothing Tower can't render in arresting fashion. Near the end of "Retreat," a hunter who has killed a moose and cut out the short ribs and tenderloin characterizes the latter as "a tapered log of flesh that looked like a peeled boa constrictor." Tower's prose is a welcome reminder that the first job of the fiction writer is to introduce the reader to worlds both new and familiar in ways they wouldn't have arrived at on their own.

In the collection's finest story, "On the Show," Tower writes with spellbinding virtuosity. Beginning with the portentous "Now it's dark," the story proceeds with the sun setting on a traveling carnival show. (Readers who have sworn off stories set in zoos and amusement parks will be happy to know that we're not in George Saunders' counterfactual America; sometimes a carnival is just a carnival.)

The sky "glows hyena brown" as egrets take flight over a drainage canal. A lizard, a "Florida anole, cocked on the shoulder of the propane tank beside the service window, slips down the tank's enamel face into a crescent of deep rust."

The surface of the rusting tank prompts the lizard into changing colors, but it's a trick. "Against the lizard's belly, the rust's soothing friction offers an illusion of heat, and the lizard's hide goes from the color of a new leaf to the color of a dead one." This cinematic opening, full of garish colors and things not quite what they seem, introduces an unputdownable whodunit that centers on the molestation of a young boy.

As to why Tower had to wait so many years for his debut is anyone's guess, but one suspects we'll be hearing his name -- which invokes prose that is both soaring and deep -- for a long time to come.

(Originally published in the L.A. Times)

Jessica says

I know I'm late getting to this, but here I go and so far I gotta alert you others: believe the hype. This is fucking phenomenal.

I've been reading a lot of them lately so I think I'm qualified to complain that a good short story collection is hard to find. There is a lot of fairly good short fiction, and short fiction with good things about it, but actually finding an entire book of stories by one author that is solidly original and well-written and interesting and fresh is not something that happens too often to me. Actually a frenemy of mine told me to read this over a year ago, and I even got it out of the library then but didn't manage to open it before it was due back. Then about a month or two ago, I read some totally underwhelming Wells Tower story in the New Yorker, and so like Mike Reynolds, I was just kind of all, "meh, yeah whatever." I actually don't remember what did make me get this out of the library again, only holy shit, wow, I'm really glad I did! This is one of those books that totally deserved all the annoying hype. Again, I've been reading a lot of short fiction and the truth is that while there are some great stories out there, it's almost impossible for me to make it through an entire collection by one author. Very few writers have a voice or perspective that's compelling enough to shack up with for a series of unconnected but underlyingly similar episodes. And there are just so many traps for short stories: it's too easy for them either to be boring or else a bit maudlin and reliant on tragic cliches, or too painfully straining for eccentric whimsy (which I hate).

I can't remember if I've talked about this on here already, but earlier this year I was watching Mulholland Drive and trying to figure out what was so good about it. What I realized is that every line of dialogue in that movie, each shot, everything that happens, is either just a little or widely off what you're expecting. The movie heightens and exploits this by being set in this noirish genred world: since you sort of think you know what you're looking at, you're not expecting to be surprised, and Lynch shows I think good control for once in not making things so weird that you ever fully stop expecting that you know at least partly what to expect. Like, a lot of the times with his other stuff you're aware going in that it's all gonna be zany bizarro, but just being surprised doesn't provide that same immense thrill if you understand that that's what's scheduled to happen. It's the difference between seeing a sequined drag queen at the Halloween Parade and seeing one working in a hospital. Anyway, this is a total digression, and maybe it's an obvious point, but since then that's been my standard for evaluating a lot of movies and books. Does it feel real and coherent enough that on some level I think I know what to expect -- i.e., it's not just random silly craziness -- but then constantly destabilizes me by going somewhere I'm not expecting but am able to follow? Wells Powers does that in all of these stories. This book is cliché-free, and there's no sentence in here that you can guess is coming. I was never like, "Oh, another tragic divorced guy who drinks," or "Oh, another kids-are-so-cruel childhood reminiscence." Or rather, I was, but then what followed wasn't like anything I'd read before. I don't mean it was all over-the-top shocking, just that it was new. And that newness is what I'm after when I read contemporary fiction.

These stories are mostly about men, sad men, sad and troubled men, in a way that isn't like anyone else's sad troubled men stories. The sexy, hilarious prom king here is obviously the title story -- the last one in the book -- which, in case you haven't heard, is about FUCKING VIKINGS. This one's the joke that will keep on being funny forever, that works on so many levels, that you make your brothers read. I liked all the other ones too, and they were as good even without being as show-stoppingly flashy. I think my favorites were the first two, and "Door in Your Eye." There weren't any duds though. I totally recommend this volume, unless you yourself are trying to write short fiction, in which case it will probably just make you depressed about not being as talented as this guy. Maybe that's good, though. Maybe you should stop. After reading this I wondered if a lot of people should.

Richard Derus says

If this is the beginning of a career, it's hella fine and bodes so well for the rest of his earthly time that I am thrilled and grateful he decided to write.

The nine stories in the collection are the products of much careful observation, writing, and re-writing, and that shows in their craftsmanship. There are very few infelicities of style on display here. But what doesn't show, what's invisible to the naked eye, is the muse-touch that brought Wells Tower to our shelves. He's not a writer made, he's a writer born. How dare I assess a stranger's character? I dare because there are only a few times in life when the hairs on one's neck stand up and the palms of one's hands moisten when someone not right there **feels** like they are.

Tower is a star. He writes beautifully. He imagines fully the characters he presents to us. These are craftsmanly things, things I can teach someone to do. What I can't teach someone to do is to see so deeply into the reality of another's life. That makes Tower very unusual.

In every story in this collection, there is something unexpected. The last story, set in Viking times, is a complete departure from the present-day fringes-of-society settings of all the others...but only at first glance. The characters in Tower's fiction are all men looking for meaning in all the socially sanctioned places and not finding it. I can't think of a more evergreen plot off hand. But these men all have one thing in common that isn't superficial. They are all wounded from within by anger.

An angry Viking...yeah, so? The Viking in question, however, is wounded by the anger he feels at change, at the world daring to shift him into a new place. Like the other Tower men, modern men, he feels cut off from his source of meaning and connection. I don't think this is anachronistic, because I think that's been a human experience since scientific-Adam fathered the first huge batch of modern human males.

Why read about angry men, I hear the ladies murmur, we see 'em all the time...yes, I know, but ask yourself this: Why is anger so male an emotion? Why are men so ticked all the time? Turn to fiction for your answers. Betrayal of the trust a man reposes in others is a biig one ("The Brown Coast", "Wild America", "On the Show"), or the inability of humans to cope with change ("Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned", "Door in Your Eye", "Executors of Important Energies")...in short, the same things that make women angry, right?

Not exactly. Tower's men, like the flesh-and-blood ones I know and love, are befuddled by the very fact of feelings. They aren't mad because you hurt their feelings, they're mad because you found them in the first place and THEN hurt them.

And they have no way to tell you this. So Tower had to do it for you. So he did. Go say your thank-yous at the cash register, buy his book, read it and apply your confusion to the real men in your life.

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

You know that dizzy, clammy feeling just after you've gotten really infuriated with someone and exploded into a fit of dismal, futile nastiness by saying something sadistic and clever and perhaps even true enough--to them, at least--that, regardless, cuts straight to the bone of the listener, causing you almost immediately afterward to break out into a full body attack of hives and dripping sweat, heart suddenly hammering, as you watch that person spontaneously combust before your very eyes, leaving nothing but a sad little pile of dust in the wake of your cruelty? You know how icky it can feel to "win" sometimes? This book sort of makes you feel like that. It is unspoken ugliness, the sides of ourselves that we like to pretend are not there, as if we are somehow above them: petty jealousies, hatred of the happy, the urge to smash that which we see as more lovely than ourselves. Yes, ugly. This isn't just a parade of the grotesque, though. Tower manages to catch the smothering moment of clarity just after the terrifyingly terrible, the second where a shameful glimpse at the self is only just beginning to peak out; the moment when you first hear the screaming of your subconscious as your guts begin a series of somersaults. It bothers the reader, as it is a distantly familiar apparition of a feeling, a shameful memory that you only allow to appear in the forefront of your mind long enough to realize it is once again time to submerge it. Warning: the title story is horrifying, the rest are really uncomfortable. Don't come to this tiny, deceptively bright little collection in search of a burst of sunshine. Rather, expect to grimace.

P.S. One hundredth review! Someone bake me some cupcakes or sumthin'.

jo says

this is pretty fabulous short story writing. maybe not everyone's cup of tea, but definitely splendid. it's quite impressive, for one, that wells tower should have waited so long to put out a collection, piling up stories in this and that first-rate magazine seemingly with no hurry whatsoever, giving thus the impression of being after beauty and intensity of narration rather than a book. my friend mike compares these stories to flannery o'connor's but the only similarity i see, besides the extraordinarily precise, rich, and sensual use of language, is their intensity. tower is not interested, it seems to me, in messages. (o'connor is, though one tends to have no clue what the message is). maybe the title story, though, and that story's title come as close as anything to give us a sense of what this collection is about. by my count, there are three abused children (nothing graphic at all) and more children, some in flashback, whose childhood seems pretty blown; a number of youngish-to-middle-aged guys who have been taken by the currents of life to places they didn't really want to go, with no idea about what to do now that they are there; and a lot of non-protagonist characters with distinctly unhappy or unappealing lives.

yet the stories are not sad. they are very funny. they are veined with desolation, but not in a way that'll hit you, because they are not meant for identification but for distance.

maybe the distance comes from the humor and the preposterous language. lots of it comes from the intensity of the descriptions. language this beautiful and stark and desecratingly vernacular gives you 3 minutes of a startling film, not a feature-length story in which you can recognize yourself.

also as mike has observed, there is no psychology going on here. you can do the psychological work yourself, but tower is not after motivations and traumatic roots. the relentless superficiality – this determination to stay on the surface of things – is perhaps what makes these stories so stunning: surely these characters are coming from someplace horrid. surely we will be told what the horrid place they are coming from is. surely we will learn what afflicts them. tower doesn't satisfy.

except, there's a lot lovelessness. people not connecting. children left casually to themselves. people being mean and selfish in unexplained way, as if it were the most unremarkable thing in the world. it's as if tower had no desire whatsoever to raise our moral outrage. this is how it is. wanna laugh at it or what?

my favorites are “Executors of Important Energies,” “Down Through the Valley,” and “Everything Ravaged.”

Barry says

For me, this collection shows that Wells Tower is a master of words, a true talent with crafting some beautiful sentences, but for the most part, is still some way short of being a great storyteller. This may sound rather harsh - after all this is his first published collection - but with all the hype surrounding him currently, I can't help but expecting more from this book.

The stories are fast paced and as mentioned the language is wonderful, I had no trouble getting into a story and wanting to find out where it was going. Anger felt genuinely raw and violent, descriptive scenes made me feel like I was within the landscape, and I was even impressed that during one fight scene actual wrestling / BJJ terms and techniques were used (but this mainly stems from recently reading a short story where someone throws a 'Jiu-Jitsu Kick', err...). He also seems to have a good aptitude for writing as a child; these moments for me were easily the most interesting.

But this also leads on to a major issue I have with most of the stories in the collection, they feel disconnected within themselves at times, and have very unsatisfying endings. Take the story 'On The Show', without detail to avoid spoilers, it starts with two children at a carnival, meeting for the first time, along with a parent each who are going on a first date together. A major part of the story soon emerges involving one of the children, from which point the story changes to a carnival worker on the pirate ship, his story evolves somewhat, then it quickly jumps to a worker on a different ride momentarily, then back to the pirate ship guy, off to a cattle competition judge, and quickly back to pirate ship chap for a disappointing ending, which resolves near on nothing for any of the characters. Personally, while it seems rather fashionable to include these open endings in short stories, I find them rather unsatisfying, or at least when everyone bar one in a nine story collection ends like it.

The final story, the one which this book takes its title from, is the one most people will have heard about or already read, the one about the Vikings. In theory it is a sudden departure from the modern day tales, (which I don't have a problem with like some don't seem keen on) but in practice it feels much like the others, it's still about a young to middle age male living to survive, having family issues, and trying to decide what to do with his life. It certainly isn't true to any historical Viking history, yes the names are from that part of the world, but they speak perfect, modern English, and at least twice they are seen saying 'motherfucker', a term I highly doubt a Viking word use even in his native tongue. This is my favourite story in the collection for one simple reason, it has a ending! There is a nice introductory beginning, something happens in the middle,

and you know what has happened by the end, not a 100% ending, you can still imagine in your mind how certain characters live afterwards if you so wish too, but not a loose ending which actually feels like it's about 65% through the story you want to hear, like the rest in this book.

While this collection has left me slightly underwhelmed, I am still very interested in what Mr. Tower does in future. I first read his story 'Raw Water' in 'The Best American Short Stories 2010' (originally published in McSweeney's) which isn't included in this collection. I don't know when that was written compared to the stories here, but I'd imagine after as it felt more connected, more of a actual story, and if he can grasp this vital skill then I have no doubt he can become a modern great as the press are currently pushing him as, but from this set alone, I don't see it.

Mykle says

I didn't read it all. I read the first story, which was your standard New Yorker story about a middle-aged middle-class guy doing something vague and poignant during a Major Life Moment. And I read the last story: the same but with Vikings. I'm not going to read the ones in between unless someone can convince me one of them is significantly better, or at least different.

I think Wells Tower is a super-talented writer in all the standard workshop areas. But there's something I don't get about why the world needs any more New Yorker stories. As sharp as the prose is, it's not such a singular joy to read that it revives the well-trodden tropes of post-Raymond-Carver American fiction. Even the New Yorker is not printing these like they used to, thank God or Conde Nast.

And yet, certain highly-placed people snort up this sort of thing with a straw. The back cover brags of how these stories were published just evvvvverywhere. Wells Tower knows what highbrow lit editors want, and can produce it. Good for him. None for me, thanks.

I had such high hopes for the Viking story! It seemed like comedy gold: Vikings, but who talk like New Yorkers, in a New Yorker story about Vikings! They sack an island and are conflicted! But alas, although the conceit is so good that I couldn't help but smile at parts, he ultimately still played it all very straight, very real-lifey, very vague-and-poignant-during-a-Major-Life-Moment-y. Yawn.

I'm sure Wells Tower will write better books in the future. He's up-and-coming and all that. He ought to decide what he wants literature to become, instead of just mastering what it's been. I often suspect I'm missing out on something important by not being more highbrow-focused in my reading and writing, but this is a book I feel okay about not finishing.

Stop says

Read the STOP SMILING interview with Wells Tower...

Q&A: WELLS TOWER, author of
Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned

By Eugenia Williamson

The name Wells Tower entered the literary lexicon in 2005 when a short story about ennui-addled Vikings appeared in *The Paris Review*. "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned," plucked at random from a teeming slush pile, was Tower's first attempt at publishing his fiction.

For the next few years, fans of *Harper's* magazine and readers of *The Washington Post* could read Tower's giddily depressing journalism on subjects as casually horrifying as telemarketers and Young Republicans. Simultaneously, his fiction gained traction, culminating in last year's *New Yorker* publication of the story "Leopard."

Still, those hoping for a glimpse of the personality of this writer, deft enough to slam-dunk a first person account of a faked fainting spell, a panegyric about carnies as well as the aforementioned Vikings, were doomed to fail. Unlike nearly anyone with a byline in the supermarket circular, Tower forewent any means of self-promotion, including a homepage.

Then suddenly, thanks to the near-universal freak-out over the brilliance of his first short-story collection (the first printing of which sold out within two weeks of its release) and numerous print profiles, two of which appeared in the *New York Times*, everybody knew the basics: his pedigree (MFA, Columbia University), his age (35), his hometown (Chapel Hill, North Carolina) his residence (Greenpoint, Brooklyn, third-floor walkup).

STOP SMILING sat down to talk to him on the Boston stop of his first book tour to find out if they got it right.

Read the complete interview...

Drew says

This one's pretty hard to review, especially after paying what ended up being probably too much attention to the raving and then the backlash.

I stand by what I said in a comment elsewhere: the style of this particular book is, or should be, its point. Don't listen to the naysayers who pick apart Tower's prose and judge it illogical. They may technically be right, but I don't think a lack of logic is necessarily detrimental to prose. A few quick quotes to demonstrate half of what I'm talking about:

"...his father would be a florid fifty-year-old who would suck the innocence and joy from his child as greedily as a desert wanderer savaging a found orange."

"Little Buttons's* hygiene was poor. His eyes watered, and he so often had a piece of food in the corner of his mouth that you wondered if he kept it in a bedside saucer overnight and donned it in the morning."

(I think I've seen this quoted elsewhere, and it's not really "good" prose, but it made me laugh) "'I'd eat her whole damn *child* just to taste the thing he squeezed out of.'"

A man imagining his own cuckolding: "but start playing back all the old footage, and pretty soon Mendocino Barry steals into the frame, his bare dark-brindled haunches in your bed, candles and an incense stench fuming on the nightstand. You can see him tucking a yellow thumbnail under the scalloped elastic of her bikini underpants and shucking them down slow, maybe with a word or two about lotus blossoms. You don't want to picture how she lifts her hips up off the bed, the openmouthed anticipatory shivers, or Barry rearing up in a sun salute between her splayed knees, his tongue lolling like a tiki god in ugly throes."

But there's not much else about this book besides its style, which, as always, there's no accounting for taste. It's a pretty book about pretty ugly people. Every time Tower tries to say something profound or moralize, it comes out cloying and insincere, which could cause problems if one were not able to ascribe said moralizing to Tower's characters. Even then, hiding behind your characters because you have nothing to say is sort of a dirty trick.

I should also note that these stories aren't particularly memorable, partially because many of them don't have ends. I read part of one looking for a quote, realized I had no idea how it ended, and read about 10 pages very little of which was familiar.

I still don't dislike it, though. Ultimately, if your priority is smart, descriptive prose, you will probably like this. If you want stories that will actually disturb you, rather than just make you feel slightly bleak about humanity's prospects, it'd be better to read....oh jeez, I don't know, I don't really know that many good stories. I'll have to fall back on Wallace and say *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

*Apparently Tower is on my side regarding this grammatical bugbear: if you have a singular noun that nonetheless ends in S, and you want to make it a possessive, do you add just an apostrophe or an apostrophe and another S? Tower, Strunk and White, and I all agree that it's the latter. Most other people seem to think the former. But allow me to proselytize for a second. In this case, we can appeal to logic: if you only add an apostrophe, you have to depend on context to tell you whether the word you're dealing with is actually singular or plural. With the additional S, you can tell it's singular even if the word is alone. Yes? No?

Nick Black says

for some unfathomable reason i've been awake over 50 hours straight now. tuesday morning i arrived at the airport around 0800, to discover my flight had been the previous day. i went home, drank a six pack of beam+ginger ale that a girl had left at my place, fixed a computer, prepared replies for an IRS correspondence audit, flew back to texas...and have been unable to sleep since then. i'll head to work in about an hour here. probably approaching 70 or so when i crash out tonight. until then...

i took some notes prior to wandering around Austin with the book, and they remind me of the chapter-opening pictures from Nabokov's Lectures on Literature, so i took a picture. one day i'll look back, and remember that not everything i noted down this year involved high-performance parallel computer architectures, heywhynot myintrotoletheyouknow

The Brown Coast: 4

Retreat: 4

Executors of Important Energies: 3

Down Through the Valley: 3

Leopard: 3

Door in the Eye: 2
Wild America: 5
On the Show: 3
Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned: 2

Tower is best when he's writing about children, or embittered menchildren. "Wild America" is just fucking brilliant, and "Leopard" could have been, too. Overall, I'm kinda disappointed by this supremely hyped collection, but it's a solid plane ride worth of short stories with laughs of both the belly and nervous variety.

notgettingenough says

<http://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...>

PS: I've just realised that the title to this might seem like the ultimate comment on what goodreads has done to itself. But I assure you, it is only coincidence. :)

Mike says

"like trying to push a coin with your mind"..."a quivering halo of vermilion minnows"..."a little imp inside me whose ambrosia is my brother's wrath"..."his tongue lolling like a tiki god in ugly throes"..."big medicine on the dragon-and-blight circuit"...

I'm going to have to find someone else to call "the best writer in America without a book to his credit" in too-loud, one-sided conversations now. Like very few writers I can think of (Leonard Michaels, Joy Williams, Karen Russell, Breece Pancake), Tower seems incapable of writing a dull sentence, let alone a dull story. This has got to be the debut of the year. Buying it will be your good deed of the day.

Eh?Eh! says

Life is unlike the books of Orson Scott Card or Mercedes Lackey, where we are told in detail exactly how someone arrives at a decision (through pages of thoughts in italics in Lackey's case, sigh). Life is more like this, wading through the muck of living, acting and reacting without real prior planning. In my glass-half-empty moments, I feel like this continues until consequences accumulate to a critical point and progress has to be stopped to deal with the overflow.

I still haven't quite figured out why I read or what for. If left to myself, I wouldn't have picked up this story collection. But man, is the writing incredible. I need to remember to mark things as I read. The subjects and topics aren't whiz-bang, they're not lovely crystal moments that ache to be preserved. It must be the skill of the writer that limns these stories with a grace that I can't really attribute to the plots? Writer craft, it's magic.

Eight of the nine stories have contemporary settings. I don't see how the last, title story fits into the set. It's pretty funny, like something set to tuba music, of Vikings presented like tired suburban dwellers.

