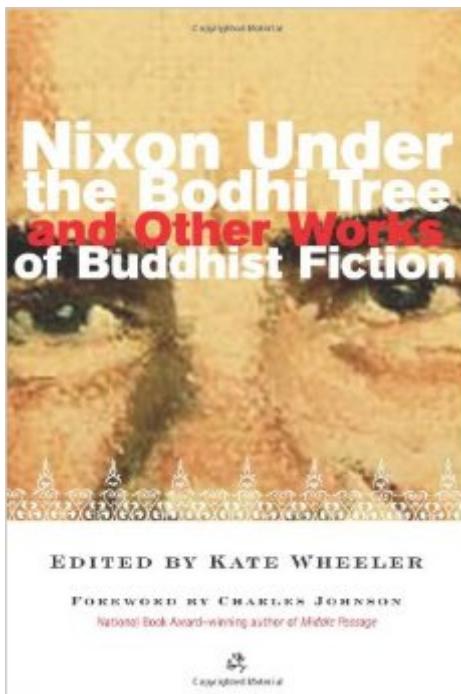


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Nixon Under The Bodhi Tree And Other Works Of Buddhist Fiction



Synopsis

Pico Iyer, Victor Pelevin, Doris Dorrie and other renowned contributors join young award-winners in what National Book Award-winner Charles Johnson calls "an embarrassment of literary riches," sure to please fiction lovers of every stripe. From the O. Henry Award-winning title story, to visionary short-shorts and barely fictionalized personal memoirs, Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree is inventive, exciting, and unlike any collection before it.

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Customer Reviews

This book has such a wide array of stories in a genre that seems to be developing in the U.S. in the last few years. If one has a spiritual orientation, and has enjoyed fiction, it becomes hard to read the kind of books that are oriented towards mystery stories, high tension dramas, tales of romance, etc. They just are rather hollow after your orientation changes. Yet texts on teachings also run out of gas after a while: you know what the map looks like, there's no need to keep reading the manual. Some which are oriented more to inspiration than instruction are still nourishing. Poetry in the spiritual mode is also good but usually just a brief touch. But this collection of fiction presented by this host of different presenters is quite powerful. The outlook is primarily Buddhist but many of the stories are just presenting an aspect of the fundamental questions of existence and the "Buddhist" part does not even apply. It's just looking at our aliveness from many viewpoints. Not everything will be loved by every reader but there is so much variation in the orientation and style that it makes you look forward to each new offering as it comes up. Also, an unexpected gift was that these offerings led

me to explore other writings of some of the writers: for example, Pico Iyer, and Francesca Hampton (her "Greyhound Bodhisattva" is stunning. There are many other treats here and the impact of many of the stories is quite wonderful.

What's this first-ever anthology of "Buddhist fiction" offer? Editor Kate Wheeler comments how according to dharma, everything's already a fiction; stories represent "a redoubled version of the existential mistake that lies at the heart of all suffering." (xiv) Still, traditions in Buddhism tell stories, and the ones here come from contemporary writers, a few well-known, many humbler practitioners. I preferred the longer stories to the shorter-- they can range from the standout not-quite holiday in Cambodia "Beheadings" by Kira Salek at thirty-four pages and the fine first chapter from Keith Katchick's ambitious novel "Hungry Ghost" (see my review) to three-paragraph glimpses of insight. I liked the stories that took on the curious predicaments of people trying to learn about Buddhism or attempting to practice it while questioning its estranging qualities in daily life; those by some writers from within the tradition tended to be less gripping, perhaps from insider's situations unfamiliar to me. Some entries appeared to be memoirs rather than fiction. Sharon Cameron's essay on meditation in its disorienting intensity seems not so much fiction as self-dramatization; Anne Carolyn Klein's account of translation appears non-fiction; Pico Iyer's excerpt from his Japan narrative feels factual. Others by certain, higher-profile writers may have been chosen more on their content or the reputation of their contributors rather than merit that a "blind" selection process might have selected, I suspect. Some of these, taking place in monasteries or on retreats, appear aimed at the likely audience already in the know. Still, especially for experienced students and teachers, I suppose many of these entries might satisfy-- the key verb for inclusion Wheeler notes--most readers. Gerald Reilly's title story and M.J. Huang's parable "Rebirth," start off this collection promisingly. Ira Sukrungruang's "The Golden Mix" keeps the oddness of its setting, an animal shelter, and its visitor without becoming cloying or cute-- which in less skillful hands could have decayed. Instead, we get this easygoing, yet unsettling, tale in everyday dialogue and ordinary Midwestern settings infused with a bit of mystery. Such offbeat, without being coy, moments enrich Francesca Hampton's "Greyhound Bodhisattva" and Easton Waller's "The War Against the Lawns," paired well together, as are many entries as arranged by Wheeler. Salek's inquiring narrator takes us into the longest story, "Beheadings," which in the best manner feels as if told to us first-hand, as real life. It concludes perfectly. Seeking her brother in Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge still occupy parts of the territory, she looks for her vanished, damaged, suffering brother. "David might have said my karma was good, though he couldn't have known how much I tempted the world. How much I hated it for

its senseless parceling of benevolence and pain."This tough-mindedness, in Reilly, Huang, Sukrungruang, Hampton, Waller, and Salek, makes this anthology at its strongest far from a sentimental or pat assembly of platitudes. Buddhism upends many from their meditation mats. In some of the best stories, these challenging rather than comforting teachings are confronted and puzzled over by those on the outside looking in, in more ways than one.Victor Pelevin's "The Guest at the Feast of Bon" shows why his postmodern novels attract a cult following. I can't give away much, but this reminded me of his Russian forebears, or Hesse or Camus, in his philosophical reflections merged into an eerie meditation. "We call God that which we are not yet capable of killing, but once we have killed it, the matter is closed." (237) Killing one's self, the narrator reflects, "is an attempt to kill the God dwelling within us. We are punishing him for condemning us to torment, we are attempting to match him in omnipotence, we may even usurp his function by putting a sudden end to the puppet show he began." This existential tale takes on Japan, St. Sebastian, belief, death, and dragons and it ends as the penultimate entry in this collection hauntingly.

Since the first time I checked this book out of my local library I've checked it out again so many times that I finally decided to just purchase my own copy. There are many great short stories in this collection and two that blew me away. One I read out loud at different times to both my children and girlfriend and wrote the author a note of thanks.

Fun read.

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