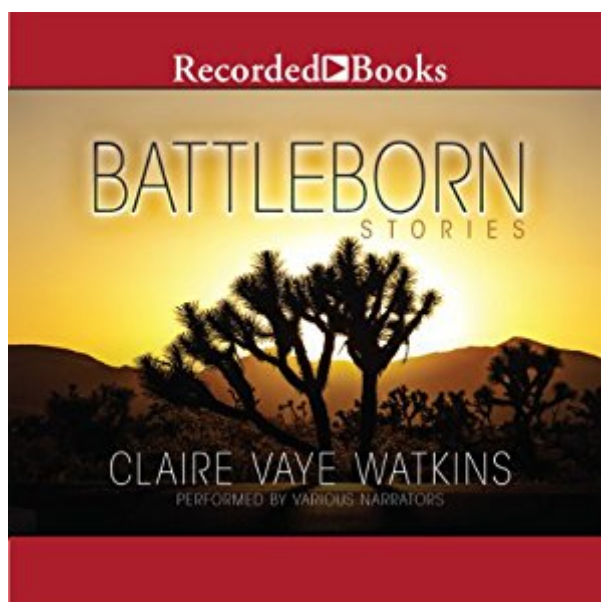


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Battleborn



Synopsis

Like the work of Cormac McCarthy, Denis Johnson, Richard Ford, and Annie Proulx, *Battleborn* represents a near-perfect confluence of sensibility and setting, and the introduction of an exceptionally powerful and original literary voice. In each of these ten unforgettable stories, Claire Vaye Watkins writes her way fearlessly into the mythology of the American West, utterly reimagining it. Her characters orbit around the region's vast spaces, winning redemption despite - and often because of - the hardship and violence they endure. The arrival of a foreigner transforms the exchange of eroticism and emotion at a prostitution ranch. A prospecting hermit discovers the limits of his rugged individualism when he tries to rescue an abused teenager. Decades after she led her best friend into a degrading encounter in a Vegas hotel room, a woman feels the aftershock. Most bravely of all, Watkins takes on - and reinvents - her own troubled legacy in a story that emerges from the mayhem and destruction of *Helter Skelter*. Arcing from the sweeping and sublime to the minute and personal, from Gold Rush to ghost town to desert to brothel, the collection echoes not only in its title but also in its fierce, undefeated spirit the motto of her home state.

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Customer Reviews

One of the reasons I'm drawn to fiction set in the West is that the good stuff, the really good stuff, brings this part of the world to life. It is a vivid, harsh, beautiful place that rarely nurtures but often rewards anyone who can handle it. Many of the characters can handle it in Claire Vaye Watkins's brilliant stories in *Battleborn*, which are set in Nevada and Northern California. They just don't know

they can handle it until circumstances point it out to them abruptly. That's certainly the case in "The Last Thing We Need". Thomas Grey, who lives out in the Middle of Nowhere, finds the debris of what may have been a wreck and writes to the man whose name and address he finds on some prescription bottles. Even though he has a wife and two children, he lives mostly with his thoughts. And, because the man he is writing to has not answered, Thomas Grey begins to relay his thoughts: "This is our old joke. Like all our memories, we like to take it out once in a while and lay it flat on the kitchen table, the way my wife does with her sewing patterns, where we line up the shape of our life against that which we thought it would be by now." "I'll tell you what I don't tell her, that there is something shameful in this, the buoying of our sinking spirits with old stories." And later: "On second thought, perhaps sometimes these things are best left by the side of the road, as it were. Sometimes a person wants a part of you that's no good. Sometimes love is a wound that opens and closes, opens and closes, all our lives." Grey finds out that there is something he cares very much about besides the past. He can handle where he is and what he has. Other characters need to leave to reach that epiphany. One leaves a brother to his own devices after his sibling is enthralled by something else out in the land where gold was hunted and where gamblers still believe they will come out on top. Another has been depending on her sister and reaches a point where, perhaps, her sister can now depend on her. Others are not so successful. Not all attempts by the men to be heroic succeed, as one old-time miner discovers. Not all attempts by the women to let go of the past succeed. For all of them, the men and the women, the ones who thrive and the ones who barely survive, promises matter. In a story, "The Diggings", set during the Gold Rush, a 49'er explains: "A promise unkept will take a man's mind. It does not matter whether the promise is made by a woman or a territory or a future foretold. ... Because though I was afraid and angry and lonesome much of the time, I was also closer to my own raw heart there in the territory than I have ever been since."

There is a bit of a formula to writing short stories, especially of the more modern variety, say last fifty years or so. You take personal details, be they landscape or family history or both, and apply them to an exploration of the human condition. That is to say, you see how humanity, as the author sees it, would react to the experiences you have had, at least in variation, and/or in the places you experienced them. The trick, which Claire Vaye Watkins has taken to quite well as I see it, is to create unique characters through which to explore this. In that way it becomes more insightful, more distant and yet more real, because we can set ourselves apart a bit as the reader, and say that while the act may be abhorrent or terrifying emotionally, that is how that character must act in order to cope. It is only later, in contemplating, that we are able to see ourselves in the humanity of it all.

Watkins is able to trick us into seeing ourselves in a new light, whether it was her intent or not. This short story collection shows us a link between unique madams, murderous cults and even peafowl that explains a history not seen in academic books of that genre. She explains the history of learned reaction and interaction against a backdrop where little else can distract you from it. That is not to say the Nevada starkness is not hauntingly beautiful and present, but you cannot help but see the fine details carved into the varied characters when they play against such an open canvas, like a play in black-box theater.

graphic modern fiction set in watkins' home state of nevada. watkins' father spent some time with the manson family, until he fled the colony and moved to nevada. i purchased this book to read that one story she wrote about that period in her life, but the rest of the book contains stories that, in my opinion, were just as good. a few were so horrifying, they were better, IMHO. the settings are stark, and some of the topics are disturbing, to say the least. some of the stories, particularly that of two innocent tourists who accompany some boys to a hotel room are horrifying. watkins can write characters whose personalities are as diverse as the las vegas population. i found watkins' stories tense and page-turning, and i would compare her to jon raymond, or virginia beach's mark richards. of all the modern fiction i've discovered, this collection is among the best. it's not for the faint of heart, but worth every minute of your time.

I just graduated from college with a Bachelors of Arts in Photojournalism but my minor was Creative Writing, this book was assigned for the final class of my minor "Elements of Craft" where we read different fiction novels and collections and assessed the craft of the author's work. I am not a fiction person. I will admit that immediately, but wow, I am obsessed with this book. I'm still 100 pages shy of finishing it, but so far the 5ish stories I've read have blown me away. I never knew fiction could be so good. I've been recommending this book to everyone who will listen. And so far everyone's seemed very interested in it. I've had multiple requests to borrow my book, but I'm too scared to part with it for fear I won't get it back. This one is definitely staying in my library!

Although I don't usually read short stories, I purchased this collection because I enjoyed Watkins' other book, "Gold Fame Citrus." In short: this collection is fantastic and arguably better than Gold Fame Citrus. I could try and fail to describe why the collection is so good (well written, imaginative, extremely different viewpoints and styles from story to story), but one thing I found interesting is that Watkins manages to end most of the stories on a philosophical note without seeming pretentious or

preachy, which is somewhat amazing considering how often other authors try the same approach and fail.

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