

LINDA SILLITOE. *Windows on the Sea and Other Stories*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989. 175 pp. Paperback, \$9.95.

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Possibly due to her journalistic background, Linda Sillitoe is a master of situation. Her novel, *Sideways to the Sun*, traps readers from the first lines and, like a good mystery, releases them only at the final page. Sillitoe's collection of short stories, *Windows on the Sea*, does it again—nearly coerces the reader into turning the pages, reading “one more” story, and then another, until the back cover appears.

Such enticement can be downright annoying to those of us who tend to malign mainstream Wasatch Front culture and define Utah's literary characteristics with more elemental, western motifs. We are not happily drawn into stories of the too-common-for-literature suburbanites we often dismiss as “Utah Mormons.” But Sillitoe catches us with compelling, believable situations, and, in her best stories, draws us into the minds of her characters before we can stop her.

Some of the characters in *Windows on the Sea* gain little identity outside of their situations. For example, Leah and Karen, in “A String of Intersections,” feel incomplete in their creation, unsatisfying, as do their peripheral husbands. We are left wanting to know more, not necessarily about how they will get past their respective marital crises, but about the women themselves. Why did Leah, the once passionate, compassionate co-ed, marry the vain, worldly Skip? How does she rationalize her glitzy lifestyle? We suspect that Skip will eventually prove disastrous, but when he is caught in a long-running jewelry scam, we want to know Leah better, well enough to bear with her the full shock, the irretrievability of earlier values. Karen is slightly more real, maybe because she lives a more common life-style, but she too is lost in the abruptness of the narrative. We gain glimpses of her through her thoughts, as the point of view shifts, but more subtle revelations, possibly given through the lunchtime conversation, would give us more. Sillitoe tells more than she shows in this story, and we feel cheated when characters so potentially rich are placed in such compelling situations but are not developed.

The second story, “The Last Day of Spring,” has more engrossing characterizations, especially in Laurie, a young adolescent faced with a beloved aunt's disease and premature death. With this story, Sillitoe begins a pattern which gains significance

and creativity as the collection continues: she is willing to make extraordinary leaps into unusual points of view. We come to understand that Laurie's aunt, Jennifer, is dying only as we look past Laurie's limited perceptions and pick up the clues dropped by the well-meaning adults who have neither the courage nor the insight to explain a painful situation. The story gains emotion, not simply through the loss of a young, charismatic woman we see only obliquely, but through the sympathy we feel for the niece who wants to understand as an adult yet is bitterly hurt by the harshness of adult reality when she confronts it. Laurie is not only losing her Aunt Jennifer, but is also losing her trust in the adults whom she has viewed with respect; is losing her innocence, the belief that everything will work out with enough Sunday School faith; and is losing her assurance that the universe is essentially benevolent.

We leave Laurie crying on her bed, too young and upset to articulate the complex emotions she is feeling. But we have been given enough to understand. Sillitoe should have left us there with the heartbroken girl and resisted the final lines that take us out of Laurie's mind and explain what we already know. Sillitoe has handled point-of-view persuasively until this point, which is why these lines of the story are a small letdown.

Sillitoe takes us, quite daringly and with more control, into entirely different personas in such pieces as "Coyote Tracks," "Bishop Ted," and "Windows on the Sea." "Coyote Tracks" places us in an unusual setting, for Sillitoe's fiction; a young Salt Lake City woman named Shannon has moved herself and her preteenage daughter Marci to Monument Valley, where she teaches at the high school. Shannon and her husband, Don, lost a baby boy to crib death a few years before the story takes place, and now Shannon is working to stabilize her feelings about her husband leaving her for another woman. Divorce is uncertain. Don is simultaneously patronizing, authoritarian, and conciliatory; his frequent telephone calls make it clear that he is beginning to regret the losses caused by his infidelity.

In this story Sillitoe takes her most "un-Mormonly" perspective, and it is tempting to forget that Shannon, not Sillitoe, is the governing psyche. Shannon has moved from a Platonic to a sexual relationship with a Navajo colleague, a healthier relationship than she previously had with her husband. It is ironic, at least from a Latter-day Saint perspective, that the first seeds of healing and reconciliation with her husband come from violating the sacred Latter-day Saint principle of chastity:

[Shannon] stayed awake a long time after Stan slept, watching the moonlight, broken into panes by the window, move across their

bodies. She recalled how Stan had defended Don the other night even while holding her, Don's wife, in his arms—and by defending Don had shielded her from Don's perceived blame. Some of her guilt was gone, she realized. She considered whether Heidi, once her friend, had ever taken her part with Don. Most likely she had, a woman in Don's arms who, through him, sensed Shannon's grief. Once that surprising conclusion settled like certainty in her solar plexus, Shannon imagined Don and Heidi together, as she and Stan were now, and for the first time felt no pain. If Don had found solace even temporarily—a possibility that had struck her as terribly unfair at the time—she could almost be happy someone had given him what she could not. Not then. (63)

The story ends with Shannon and Stan both leaving Monument Valley to visit their respective spouses, Shannon in Salt Lake City, where the people and culture are part of her, and Stan to Navajo Mountain, a remote settlement nearly unknown to whites. We are left wondering if either will return, and, more significantly, we are left to ponder the commandments of Shannon's faith versus the contingencies of her situation. This time, admirably, Sillitoe does not comment.

At the outset, "Bishop Ted" looks like the most predictable story in the collection, but it leads into surprising territory. The story is written as the journal of a woman named Cheryl, whose husband was killed a couple of years before in a car accident, leaving her with three rowdy, apparently homely, children. Cheryl seems to be in a particularly good position now to sympathize with an old friend, Ellen, who has never married. Ellen was recently engaged to a man who has also died suddenly, leaving her, well into her thirties, unwed and pregnant. "Bishop Ted," as Cheryl calls their new bishop, has just been called to authority. It is difficult for Cheryl to adjust to his new authority, as up until now he has been merely a fond acquaintance in the ward. Cheryl is shocked when he decides to excommunicate Ellen, and we expect the story to continue in its law-vs.-situation, justice-vs.-mercy theme. We are surprised, though. Ellen nearly disappears from the story, as Cheryl rationalizes her dilemma and becomes obsessed with the bishop himself. We begin to understand the depths of Cheryl's own loneliness and sexual frustration as she records an ecclesiastical visit from him:

After he left I tried to remember the last conversation I've had alone with a man, any man, since Larry died. I don't think it's happened. The pediatrician comes closest, and then the kids are always climbing on me. Of course I talked with Bishop Sorenson before Ted became bishop, but that's different. That's over a desk, not eye to eye in a room growing soft with the lateness of the hour. (152)

Why Bishop Ted chose to visit, alone, in a widow's home is not clear. We have only Cheryl's perspective. But Cheryl interprets every succeeding encounter as a romantic invitation from him. We see her slip more into a world of wishes with every journal entry. She is attracted to his "glow"; she comments on the "polished shaft" he has become since taking the mantle of authority upon him; she catalogues evidence that Sally, Ted's wife, is not fully worthy of him. The point of view makes it difficult for us to gauge the objectivity of Cheryl's comments, and for awhile, we want to give them credibility. But it becomes increasingly clear that Cheryl is not in control of her perceptions.

Reading episodes from early Church history, Cheryl comes to a greater "understanding" of polygamy than she has before. It is not hard to predict, after this, that Cheryl goes over the edge. Her journal entries end, at least for us, with her outside the home of the bishop and his wife. Cheryl has left her rambunctious children alone in the park until she returns and has parked in front of Ted and Sally's home, preparing to move herself and her suitcases out to the front walk, where she will await their happy discovery that she and the children are moving in.

"Bishop Ted" is one of Sillitoe's finest stories. The journal format allows no narrative commentary; we are caught completely in Cheryl's consciousness. We are nearly forced to sympathize with a woman who, from any other perspective, would be unattractive and unbalanced. Sillitoe plays with ironies that invite us to consider the complexity of delusion and possibly sin. "Coyote Tracks" brought its protagonist to the beginning of healing, of reconciliation, through what is normally viewed as grave sin. In "Bishop Ted," the most surprising result is that Cheryl's deepening delusions allow her to see her children with new appreciation and release her from much of the depression she is feeling as a single mother. She notices the beauty of the natural world around her, probably for the first time in years. We almost hope that Cheryl is right, that the Spirit *has* told her truth, that the joy she anticipates will materialize.

However, unlike "Coyote Tracks," "Bishop Ted" leaves us without real hope. Cheryl is not on the verge of finding herself, of reconciling the paradoxes of her situation, or of transcending her own nature. We are left with a sick knowledge of the inevitable, possibly disastrous, results of Cheryl's delusions. Sillitoe's central purpose in writing this story may well have been an exercise in pure sympathy, an attempt to understand the manifestations of depression, loneliness, and desperation in a unique cultural setting. The story is one that few Latter-day Saint writers would attempt, partly because

a character like Cheryl is so low on the Wasatch Front social scale that most would dismiss her with derision or, at best, embarrassment.

All of the stories in *Windows on the Sea*, even the weakest, are written skillfully and sensitively enough to bear critical scrutiny. Sillitoe teases us with stereotypes and sometimes is not quite able to escape them, but when she does, she startles us out of comfortable judgmental positions. A bit more editing could have eliminated some confusion, particularly in the opening stories, where pronouns are occasionally vague and introductions too brief for full clarity. But, as a whole, Sillitoe's fictional style is as straightforward as her journalism, so much so that we can miss her subtleties on a first reading. Second and third times through the book demonstrate that Sillitoe is in control of her craft. Her images and details are carefully chosen. Although settings and situations are dissimilar, a comparison with Willa Cather is not entirely out of place. Sillitoe's style, like Cather's, can be deceptively simple, with an almost distracting narrative which catches us off guard and has tremendous impact when complex human experience pushes through.