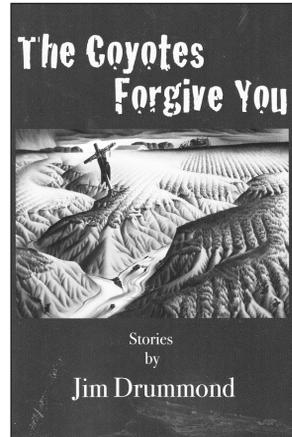


***The Coyotes Forgive You: Stories*** by Jim Drummond.  
Norman, OK: Mongrel Empire Press, 2011.  
154 pp. \$15 paperback.

*The Coyotes Forgive You* is a very idiosyncratic collection, and I'm on the fence as to whether it deserves a thumbs-up. Start with the obviously fictional blurbs on the back—from "Richard Nixon," "Wallace Stevens," and "John Milton." Is this move commendably bold or just crude? What it definitely isn't is the hallmark of a literary insider or an emerging writer who has managed to scrape acquaintance with prominent writers. Is it then a satire on literary connections? Politicians who spin outsider status as a virtue ("Vote for me; I'm not from Washington.") don't necessarily impress the cognoscenti, and I was unimpressed by Drummond's blurbs. They improve a little when read after the stories: "Cline has my ear" (by "Vincent Van Gogh") resonates after you've encountered Cline, a disabled painter whose eloquent mystique commands attention from the art world, his students, and an ambivalent love interest. But the joke still isn't exactly subtle. Here, and elsewhere, I yearn for over-the-top swagger tempered with irony.



Take, for instance, "Nolan in the Badger Café," a story in which the title character punishes an irate customer's demand ("Where is the *fucking* Tabasco?") by forcing most of the hot sauce into the customer's mouth. In real life, men who commit such assaults are either out-of-control brawlers or establishment power-abusers like the recent UC Davis pepper sprayer. But in a comic book or a B movie, they may be presented as gritty heroes for audience approval. So, is the Nolan story a puerile fantasy of revenge and control, or does it go to the meta-level, pondering people's appetite for such characters and narratives? An obviously intelligent writer, Drummond either has complex intentions or is just playing around. This piece, like a number of others in the collection, could be classified as a deliberate yarn, oriented more toward punchline than theme. I don't want to believe Drummond actually intends to cast Nolan as admirable, but the narrator doesn't help me here: Nolan is "polite to a fault," "directness [comes] naturally" to him, his direct gaze has a "powerfully seductive" effect on people, and, of course, he can subdue a powerfully-built man with one hand while "deftly" managing a Tabasco bottle with the other. All this noble stage-lighting can't be attributed solely to narcissistic distortion on Nolan's part, since the narrator's point of view turns out to be not limited

third person but omniscient, as he detours into the waitress's mind for her take on this unreachable older man who is "severely attractive but weird." Nor is this the only story in the collection in which a self-possessed man with preternatural fighting skills defeats a seemingly stronger or better-armed opponent with swift grace. And at least one of those other stories ("Woodhawks") is no yarn but a lengthy polyptych that delves seriously into questions of race, class, identity, and loyalty. So I'm still on the fence.

Certain details demonstrate either a lack of proficiency or carelessness on Drummond's part: an inconsistency of tenses in the Nolan piece, an unusual number of misspellings and typos throughout (the most damaging are "it's" for "its" and "complemented" for "complimented"). And yet, Drummond is proficient at deep narrative skills. Pacing. Character. Setting. He can put together a complex description—particularly of a boy's inner life—that feels absolutely authentic and symbolic. In "The Battle of the Washita," Cline says this about discovering his mother's infidelity with another admired adult in his life, a competent, generous man of high standards:

I was eleven, it was 1954, and the rope I swung through the trees on was the rope of Mom and Dad intertwined. The strands were so wrong here, but even I could see that the strands were also very strong.

This story is beautifully knit together with its setting along the river, Cline's early artistic promise, boyish Wild-West fantasies, the weak but not awful father, the willful but not awful go-getter mother, the drinking, manual labor, storytelling, and Chickasaw heritage all thematically interconnected: "I hated, without knowing why, all 3, but also I adored them." "The Battle of the Washita" is near-perfect, barring one suspension-of-disbelief problem: No halfway stable mother would make such a request of her eleven-year-old son, but I'm willing to overlook that. Thumbs up on this story, and also on the two that could be classified as science fiction, stories in which an unfamiliar setting is gradually and naturally revealed from within the development of character and action. "The Terrible Beauty of Angels," with its densely imagined interplay of forces—racial, sexual, political, and psychic—would not be out of place in a best-of anthology of speculative, long-term planetary futures.

Drummond has artistic integrity, never pandering or trimming, always aiming directly at some specific target of his own choosing, whether it's a realistic, surreal, or metafictional one. Even in the yarns and supernatural stories, there can be unexpected depth to his characters or broader historical significance along the way. And yet. No one could accuse this collection of being "workshopy." It is possible to err in the opposite direction, to be *too* quirky, to care *too* little about surface polish, about wanting to fit into a certain genre, or to please anyone other than the author himself. Isn't it?

— Jean Braithwaite  
University of Texas-Pan American