

Tribute
to
Aimee Bender
Willful Creatures

by
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It is an honor to be asked to say a few words about Aimee Bender's book. I am hardly a likely candidate for this. Nowhere in the Faculty Handbook, I am willing to wager, does it say that for receptions for brilliant young authors to choose someone in the Biology Department who used to be in the Mathematics Department. I confess I have never read a sentence of the Handbook, but I do read. Fiction even. And occasionally I troll through the USC section of our bookstore where I have been rewarded by the discovery of people such as James Kincaid, James Ragan and Percival Everett. TC Boyle I stumbled across in the LA Weekly. But embarrassingly I must confess I had so far missed Aimee Bender. USC has such rich talents—we are blessed to live in these fortunate times.

When I read these short stories I was strongly reminded of another voice. I did not have much time to read in the 1980s but one smoggy afternoon in a used bookstore on Santa Monica Boulevard I came onto a faded copy of "The Little Disturbances of Man" by Grace Paley. Her sentence structure and word ordering were a little unusual and her message was, well, disturbing. One of her stories contains the sentence

Fire may break out from a nasty remark.

Indeed! Grace Paley was immigrant 1950s New York City, but her "little disturbances" have a kinship with the work of Aimee Bender. At least in my head they do. Both writers leave me rather out of balance, if that makes any sense.

One of my favorite stories in Aimee's book is "Off" where a young woman has a policy at a party to kiss three men possessed of black, red and blond hair. One each, in Los Angeles it is possible to find men with at least three different hair colors. You will not be surprised to learn that somehow I have missed those parties! The character describes a painting she had done as follows:

I made that cornfield, true, but if you looked closely, there was a glinting knife hanging from each husk.

This describes these stories quite well for me, cornfields with a slight glitter which the more closely you look, the more disturbing they are. The more likely you are to get cut.

Just like Grace Paley of quite another era, Aimee Bender is a dangerous writer. We are truly fortunate to have her at USC!