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A Critical Analysis of *History's Best Wishes*

By

Jeffery Keene Short

A THESIS

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A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *HISTORY'S BEST WISHES*

Jeffery Keene Short, MA

University of Nebraska, 2017

Advisor: Jonis Agee

This is a critical, reflective analysis of a work of fiction by the author Keene Short, as a means to assess and analyze the artistic and creative development of the project as a whole. The creative work is collection of nine historical fiction short stories, some connected by characters and others standing alone in the collection. The analysis actively explores and engages with several facets relevant to the author's creative goals, including theory, influences, background, motive, form, genre, and content. The analysis is divided into a summary, critique, and sample of one story from the collection, *History's Best Wishes*.

Acknowledgments

Because the process of writing fourteen short stories and shucking five of them is far from easy, and because there is no such thing as a rugged individual who can produce something independently of external influence despite the myth (lie) perpetuated in the great American Western and most American history textbooks, I would like to take this moment to thank the people who influenced me and my writing externally. I am grateful to the following people for the following reasons:

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Descriptive Summary

My short story collection *History's Best Wishes* contains nine stories set in unique historical moments, intended to reach both breadth of historical, temporal, and spatial distances, and depth within each instance portrayed. The stories are individual fragmentary moments intended to capture the opaque and often popularly ignored ways in which historical moments might be lived. As a collection, the stories explore individual discussions within the community of historians as well as writers. Six of the stories are written from a third-person perspective; two are concrete borrowed forms; one is narrated by an unreliable first-person character. The first story in the collection, "The End of Akrotiri," draws attention to the difficulties of archaeology and explores the boundaries of fiction, nonfiction, and what can be known about a post-apocalyptic setting such as the Bronze Age Minoan settlement of Akrotiti on the island of Thera that was destroyed by a volcanic eruption. The last story is a fictitious rendition of the end of the Space Race and the Cold War focusing on a real cosmonaut, Sigmund Jahn. Between these moments are smaller apocalypses, wars, civil wars, assassinations, movie productions, witch trials, mine collapses, snow storms, and interviews. Historical memory is an issue in several stories, both collective and individual. "Filling in the Gaps" and "The Pundit of Broken Socket" explore unreliable narrators as the primary movers and producers of historical knowledge. Meanwhile, "HIS 291: Intro to US History" creates a dialogue between a history student and teacher about the value of commemoration.

Because all nine stories are historical fiction, setting plays an integral role in each one. Environment, conflict, geopolitical motion, artistic intrigue, and changing technology shape the ways in which characters interact with location as something seen, felt, controlled, and subjected to. However, these stories are not necessarily place-based stories. Setting is not used to create the

pretense of a conflict, nor is it used as a character, but as an ethereal force that permeates the plots of each stories, such that characters exert a limited agency over their settings while the setting exerts a similar kind of force. In most cases, the setting (a volcanic eruption, a collapsed copper mine, a blizzard, and interstellar space) play crucial roles in how characters move or cease moving. But characters are not without their own power to influence the motion of settings as well, as some characters see the world as an antagonist to overcome.

Critique of *History's Best Wishes*

Consisting of nine short stories set in different historical times and places, *History's Best Wishes* explores the thematic connectivity between unique historical moments. The collection is nonlinear, though the stories mostly progress chronologically forward, beginning in Greece in the Bronze Age and ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The collection as a whole is intended to explore contemporary issues related to the study and interpretation of history as a process of analyzing texts in addition to populations, but individually each story is intended to act as a stand-alone narrative independent of the others.

The introductory story, "The End of Akrotiri," is a flash fiction story without a decisive main character. Keeping in mind what Kazim Ali writes in "Genre-Queer: Notes Against Generic Binaries," that ultimately "genre, like gender [can be] fluid, constructed: by the publisher, critic, reader, even writer" (Ali 29), the introductory story fulfills the multitude of generic roles readers might associate with conventional historical fiction: that it be grounded in historical fact, that it serves educational functions, that it can serve to teach as well as entertain. But as a story that resists the typical functions of a story making a long-dead community (the islanders on Thera before its Bronze Age eruption that destroyed the settlement of Akrotiri) the main character rather than one or two heroes, the story pushes its way into the territory of historical nonfiction, but retains its fictional aspects by the impossible nature of knowing what life would have been like for the citizens of Akrotiri, which was destroyed totally and swiftly.

In the collection, two stories of the American Southwest make use of historical artifacts to advance their narratives. The second story, "Scouting Locations," looks at John Wayne/John Ford westerns, particularly *Stage Coach* and several fictional titles, to look at the theatrical

nature of Westering myths and history. Ford and Wayne are literal characters in the story who bumble around movie sets. The second Southwest story takes on the form of editorials in a 1930s newspaper in a fictional Utah town called Broken Socket. The story, “The Pundit of Broken Socket,” makes use of an unreliable narrator consciously using a persona, similar to the news parodying personas of Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Samantha Bee, and Jon Stewart, to tell the story of a mine collapse. Both stories draw inspiration from a variety of satirical and metafictional works, including the stories of Donald Barthelme and Cynthia Reeves’ short story “The Punk Test.” Tinkering with borrowed form informs many of the stories.

“Filling in the Gaps” relies on an unreliable narrator as a character of a story the primary protagonist must extract. Here, memory becomes an issue of historical importance, as a research tool and artifact that can easily go away at a moment’s notice. The main character Lorena is tasked with interviewing elderly survivors of the Bosnian Genocide. This story is one of the few that connects to a previous one through the textual interconnectedness of historical narratives: Lorena reads a memoir by a Buddhist nun who appears in “Scouting Locations.” The story mixes the interview process, the survivor’s own story, and selections of the nun’s memoir, which begin to unfold as dishonest or disremembered. If postmodern literature emphasizes the difficulty in obtaining one single truth, instead glorifying a multitude of truths, the study of history is understandably more complex, but has arguable achieved a more nuanced understanding of the potential for multiple truths than literature alone ever has. History is by its nature built on the impossibility of truth, despite the potential for connection.

Instead, history and literature both move toward a narrative of missing pieces, rather than different truths. Stephen King describes writing as “an act of telepathy” (King 95), something that aptly applies to the study of history as well, in which persons of another era manufactured

documents (editorial, memoirs, letters, testimonies, and even Western movies) for the sake of communicating something to a future audience, or rather, historians insist on studying these texts as if they were the intended audience. Where literature can fill in the gaps is the potential for truths that cannot be verified.

The collection as a whole brings in literary methods employed Claire Vaye Watkins, Kevin McIlvoy, and Tiphonie Yanique. These three collections pair well as both inspiration for aesthetic choices and ideal collections I hoped to write on par with. Watkins' collection *Battleborn* retroactively examines the history of Nevada through interconnected short stories. McIlvoy's collection *The Complete History of New Mexico* performs a similar task, but explores connected characters and families to a greater extent. Yanique's collection *How to Escape From a Leper Colony* stays largely in the author's contemporary period, but examines the consequences of history, particularly in "The Bridge Stories" which imagines a literal bridge connecting Caribbean islands as a product of globalization, colonization, and capitalism. These collections successfully blend historical settings that are not mere aesthetic fetishizations for a niche audience that enjoys the historical and spatial landscape of the Caribbean, Nevada, or New Mexico. Instead, they use literature as a way to understand the potential experiences of people living in unique circumstances.

Circumstance was a driving force behind the historical choices I made in this collection. Motivated by postmodernist stories and the use of borrowed forms to tell stories, "HIS 291, Intro to US History" tells the story of a Guatemalan woman pushed into espionage during the Cold War, as told by responses to mid-term exam for a 200-level survey class on American history. Extending Howard Zinn's notion that in "the short run (and so far human history has consisted only of short runs), the victims, themselves desperate and tainted with the culture that oppresses

them, turn on other victims” (Zinn 10), I used the form of a test for an American history class to construct an artificial platform for a character to reconstruct a new understanding of history, one that tells of borders and the oppressed on the platform of one exploring only American imperial leaders and conquest. One character from this blatantly contrived form, Carla, however, appears again in the story “Caracas, 1958,” with a third-person narrator disconnected from the student narrator of the history test responses. Here, the potential for historical accuracy becomes muddled. If, in the fictional version of history in which these stories take place, the story of Carla in Caracas exists, then the US history test must exist outside the collection’s world as a whole, because the student narrator could not have written about a real person in the student’s test responses. But these stories coincide in the same fictional world.

The last story, “Interkosmos,” sullies historical fact even further by altering the Space Race, a clear narrative of the Cold War. Here, the historical figure of Sigmund Jahn, the first German cosmonaut to leave the Earth, is portrayed in a magical realist dimension in which astronauts and cosmonauts literally harvested stars and the moon from the sky. Astronauts took the moon, the size of a basketball, and cosmonauts took stars, physically diminishing the lights in the sky. Here, the Space Race was a matter of physically colonizing the sky, and if taken to its furthest logical extreme, if all these stories take place in the same dimension, then the sky has become increasingly dark as time progresses. The sky is moonless and dimmer by the end of the last story, and stories set in different points are brighter or darker depending on when they take place in the collection.

While my intention is not to artificially or superficially play tricks on readers, I wanted to capture a sense of strange connectedness with this collection, which Yanique, Watkins, and McIlvoy accomplish in their collections by playing with time but confining their narratives to

place. I resisted the ease (or challenge) of confining my stories to one particular space and instead forced them to take place in different locations as well as times in each story. In total, the stories move from the Bronze Age Aegean Sea; the Navajo Nation and Japan in the 1930s to the 1960s; Latin America and parts of the United States throughout the Cold War; Srebrenica in 2015; A Hungarian village in 1728; a fictional town in Utah in the 1930s; Caracas in 1958; an ambiguous space between China and India in the 1970s; and Germany during the collapse of the Soviet Union. I hoped to capture a sense of globalization, focusing on strange and peculiar liminal spaces in which characters find themselves stuck between times and places.

If literature can be fluid, so too can history, if history is intended to accurately reflect the lived experiences of those subjected to study and documentation. The genres used to study history, biography and microhistory and macrohistory, can be just as fluid, because one person's life is a product of larger macrohistoric developments, which are all the culmination of microhistoric fluctuations. It may be a generic violation to make historical arguments in a collection of fictional short stories, but there is plenty of fictionalizing involved in the application of moral values and truths to the portrayal of history. Even the use of narrative to educate about history is itself a contrivance rather. This collection of short stories clearly belongs in the category of fiction, but generically I do not want to confine the potential readings of it to those that are now typical of "literature," as postmodernist masturbatory self-exonerations of cultural doubt and suburban apathy, but as a method of understanding connectivity as a dangerous boon and mathematical consequence of the unfolding of historical events, as a means through which we can see what we have in common with the victims and oppressors of the present and past.

In the unique historical moment we are in, in which truth can change with a Tweet and the fact of apocalypse, war, crime, poverty, and oppression can be contested by the swift and

uncritical pronouncement of public figures, dictators, trolls, and the millions of people who read without a critical eye, it is compelling to resist the impulse to critique notions of relative truth. The abuses of postmodernism, if they can be called such, are made more and more visible in 2016 and 2017 as global politics become less fact-based and more opinion-based. The difference between a fact and truth, then, should be noted for the sake of maintaining the basic infrastructure of society and human survival. The facts may remain the same, but truth is subjective. In this sense, the object-subject divide is distinguished between presence (a claim, a statistic, a murder, a war, an oppression, a statement, a conversation) and how those facts can be interpreted, or how humans can make meaning out of them. The current crisis identified as “post-truth” in the wake of recent ideological toxic political campaigns and the human tendency to stick to a belief with stronger conviction in the wake of that belief being proven wrong, should not be read as a matter of one fact against another, nor as one truth against another, but in the conflation of the two, and more damagingly, the conflation of truth with opinion. In this schema, by the law of transitivity, we now live in a moment in which opinions are popularly treated as equal in merit to fact, and truth in between is acts as a no-man’s land of contested territory.

The implication in *History’s Best Wishes* is that objectivity is tricky to find, but not entirely impossible. Somewhere in the murky depths of a mine collapse, a retelling of a protest, a description of Hollywood scouting assignments, or any other moment described in the stories, must be a collage of facts rearranged to create the image of truth. The presence of facts are not disputed, nor are the validity of those expressed, but the arrangement should be questioned. If this collection has political implications, it is that the arrangement of facts is worth criticizing as a skewed way of consuming and creating information, but the validity of a fact (or the falseness of a lie) should remain, to use a risky phrase, sacred.

Sample Short Story: “The End of Akrotiri”

The following short story, “The End of Akrotiri,” was first published in *Circa Spring 2016* in April of 2016. *Circa* is an independent online journal of historical fiction, published twice yearly. The story begins with an epigraph about the strange and often haunting fact of ancient archaeology, that the fact of childhood, parenthood, life, and trying to fight for life can echo thousands of years into the present from the past, with no clear resolution to contemporary listeners about the nature of those lived experiences.

“The End of Akrotiri” begins *History’s Best Wishes*, effectively beginning with an ending, the historical destruction of a human settlement in its entirety by volcanic ash that left behind only minimal architectural and concrete evidence of human life on Akrotiri. Archeological digs have proven that the settlement on Akrotiri was a product of Minoans, a nearby Bronze Age Aegean complex society that developed and a particular bull iconography in its art and possible religious expression, spreading this iconography in its colonization of nearby islands. The difficulty, then, is in the setting itself: little, if anything, can be found said about what human life looked like on Akrotiri, so little can be reasonably argued about characters, plots, or dialogue that might have taken place there.

There is only evidence of human presence, with no indication about what that presence looked like, and as such, it is impossible to justify setting a historical fiction story there because everything involved in a traditional narrative structure (plot, setting, characters, dialogue, resolution) is built on highly counter-factual speculation, and because there is no clear resolution beyond the setting’s destruction. But that is precisely the point of the collection as a whole, to capture the fault lines of history by emphasizing the dissonance in literary narrative.

The End of Akrotiri

“More images of children and adolescents have been found at Akrotiri than any other Aegean site. Many seem engaged in ritual activities, perhaps of initiation.” -Anne E. Chapin, “Frescoes” (*Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*).

All the characters in this story are dead. The setting, too, is dead. The plot, as far as we know died thousands of years ago. This story is untellable. Here’s how it starts:

The setting was a small settlement called Akrotiri on the island of Thera in the Aegean Sea. Minoans from Crete founded it. Think colonization on a small scale. Think transplanted Minoan culture (also dead) onto Thera (now Santorini) and five hundred years at least of creolization recorded in burials, frescoes, wall paintings, pottery, jewelry, abstract diffuse bull religion. Think Atlantis amid a constellation of Atlantises.

Familiar as the ghosts are, they speak very little. We can only hear them if we listen, and much of their story is lost in translation.

A pack of children migrated through the town. They ranged in age, some well into their teens before the duties of manhood and womanhood in the ancient world took hold of them. A herd of girls and boys gathered on the last day before the world ended to laugh, to explore. Barefoot, they padded their way down a dirt road between houses. Some of those houses survived. Some of the art they gazed at persists. A college of teenagers scurried beneath the cloud of five hundred years of Minoan cultivation. Adults around them fished, hunted, cooked, ate. They made art. They made fresco after fresco, and the children watched, or meandered away from the duties of emerging civilian consciousness. They congregated on the beach, away from the civilization’s inherited sighthood, the clay-borne mechanized observations of the powerful. Children must have resisted that observation. We know so little of this village buried in a

noxious tonnage of pumice after a pre-eruption earthquake toppled a handful of households, after minerals took to the air and ended Akrotiri forever, spewing ash all the way to China, snapping fast into tree rings, deconstructing Europe's climate, prophesying ruminations of doom in Egypt. One four-phased volcanic dance, and every child in Akrotiri stopped playing in what childhood there was to be had in the ancient world.

What did a crush look like in Greece in the 1600s BCE? What did it mean to turn to somebody as the mountain deity exhausted internal planetary combustion over the only world you've known and want to hold that stranger's hand as oblivion expanded like lungs above you?

Surely, as the volcano erupted, there must have been a kiss. The gods, in their betrayal, could not take even that much away from the Minoans. The anatomical precision in their frescoes says it all. They observed the body. They honored the body. The body, in the quaking calamity of a volcanic eruption, must have been the only safe haven in those few remaining moments as lightning formed in the ash clouds.

Surely the pack of Akrotiri's youth could not have died in absolute misery, not when they could sew each other together into a single togetherness. Some of the older among them, dashing away to the water, must have wanted to kiss before hell collapsed onto them. Or maybe they hid out in the houses, beneath the frescoes of their ancestors. Somewhere in the village, an infant was crying. Somewhere in the settlement, an argument between two bronze merchants was cut short, and two bearded men shook hands, looked each other in the eye before panicking, and made up. That way, they both knew, they could panic in the company of a friend.

The landed elites in their palace must have looked at the jewelry they'd harvested from the people's hands, gems from across the Mediterranean, gold from Africa, amber from Scandinavia, artwork from Anatolia, Minoan, Mycenaean, Egyptian, a cosmopolitan library of

precious goods, and the prince stood in front of it next to his window as the sky unfolded in tumultuous black, cyst orange, insurmountable grey. Did he turn to his wife and wonder if he'd been petty? Did he wonder where his child was then, or had his offspring run off long before the eruption, away from the imposing fatherhood of Akrotiri? The prince in his palace looked at his wealth, turned to his partner with a tear in his eye, and wondered if he would be allowed to take his wealth with him to the afterlife, assuming the Minoans of Akrotiri believed in such a thing.

But we do. We know of an afterlife of things we now possess. It's not people that wander into the afterlife, judged upon entry for their behavior. It's their property that possesses an immortal soul. We are the ones with the power to judge, we who look at their frescoes and point at them with question marks dripping from our tongues. We don't know them; the dead can barely speak. We don't know if they beat each other for homosexuality, if they ostracized each other for the transgression of religious skepticism, but we know that despite their efforts to produce a larger and larger generation every coming-of-age, Thera prevented the people of Akrotiri from ever having descendants.

Upon Thera's eruption, all the pregnant women died with a future inside them. All the elites died in a pile of social capital, and all the children died, we would like to think, in the wisdom that the afterlife of things is not ruled by the haughty, but the curious.

What did it mean to fall in love just before the stillborn death of history? What did it mean to communicate affection with what constituted written language in Minoan settlements, to hold onto a body next to the salty organ rhythm of the sea, and watch horror-struck as ash layers rained down, melting flesh, melting life, dissolving the simplicity of an ocean-locked civilization importing its reality from the rest of the Bronze Age? There were teenagers in Akrotiri, learning trades, becoming sensory equations but busy acquainting themselves with a cosmos that so easily

and brutally stopped them.

Everything stopped.

Every single body on Akrotiri felt the weight of boiling pumice, birth-hot falling ash, steaming rocks, the whole of the Earth's cosmetic fragmentation, and everything stopped. Kisses, meals, funerals, dances, teaching lessons, cancers, eye contact, abuse, intercourse, the intermingling of fingers, the contact of hair, the discovery of bleeding, the invention of a poem, the ingenuity of togetherness, the spontaneous burst of gratitude. All of it just stopped. One moment there was language and art. The next, ash. Piles of ash. An endlessness of ash. And beneath the ash, the remains of children in the shock of annihilation.

They must have known what was to come next. Or maybe they were undistracted by the immortality of property and more preoccupied by the fleeting buoyancy of intimacy. We have their things. A universe of materiality survived, a society of art and walls and pots. Now, in the afterlife, we can interrogate the evidence of their lives. How shall we pass judgment?