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Fiction. African American Studies. African American women protagonists lose and find love, confront sanity and craziness, and strive to make sense of their lives in North Carolina. A Jehovah's Witness girl goes door-to-door with an expert field-service partner from up north. At a call center, operator Sheila fields a caller's uncomfortable questions under a ruthless supervisor's eye. Forty-something Aunt Ginny surprises the family by finding a husband, but soon she gives them more to talk about. Pulitzer-Prize winner Edward P. Jones writes "Watts offers an impressive debut that promises only wonderful work to come." Fiction writer Marly Swick agrees: "Each story seems, at the same time, to be a breath of fresh air and an instant classic." Author Alyce Miller notes that "Watts writes with a penetrating eye for the extraordinary moments in the lives of ordinary people. As I read, I found myself holding my breath."

We Are Taking Only What We Need Details

Date : Published November 30th 2011 by BkMk Press of the University of Missouri-Kansas City

ISBN : 9781886157798

Author : Stephanie Powell Watts

Format : Paperback 221 pages

Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Audiobook

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From Reader Review We Are Taking Only What We Need for online ebook

Columbus says

What a fantastic writer and storyteller. I really wanted to give this book a higher rating but the editing here is really poor. Some books can overcome it and some cannot. Hopefully, Watts sophomore effort will correct that problem.

Andre says

This book was originally published in 2011 and is being relaunched in February to take advantage of her paperback release of *No One Is Coming To Save Us*. A collection of ten stories that maintain a consistent thread of country southern poor Black women and their quotidian lives. Her prose is fetching yet regular and these tales are mostly entertaining. The standout for me was 'Highway 18.' In that story of a young Jehovah's Witness girl out with her seasoned partner, they encounter a lady who wants to gossip about Shelby, a known prostitute about town that the young JW had some affinity for, although she wasn't sure why after only one brief meeting and chat with her.

"I was embarrassed that Shelby was so important to me. And lately, when I catch myself thinking about her, wishing for her to appear, I am just ashamed. The same vile feeling as if someone smacked a nasty word in my direction that I pretended I didn't hear." Stephanie Powell Watts knitted this story so exceptionally, it was coated with the unwritten and yet gives the reader a sense of completeness which is often difficult to pull off in short stories but her success here is indicative of her writing prowess. This talent comes through in all the stories but some felt incomplete and shallow. All in all, I would recommend it for those who like short stories and have an interest in the collective Black lives being led in the south. Thanks to Ecco Press and Edelweiss for an advanced ebook. The book publishes February 6, 2018

Jessica says

[3.5] Watts manages to take the supposed hum drum moments of life, the uninteresting pieces of people, and make it all captivating in some strange way. Nothing major happens in most of these stories. Just quiet revelations for the characters that we're following and that is refreshing. Each story kept me just as engaged as the last and I think the collection is very well put together as certain themes continued to pop up in each story. Watts is an excellent storyteller and I look forward to reading more of her work.

Jen says

Another Levar Burton Reads Podcast offering.

Meh. There didn't seem to be a point to this one. Slice of life maybe? Didn't do it for me at all. 2 stars.

Dale Jr. says

Scranton was in for a storm. An intense one, by all reports. The skies darkened their ugly, menacing grays and blacks. The rain fell at angles in sheets while trees bent against the wind, their leaves flipping up and down flashing shades of dark then light green.

Then, as soon as it began, it was over. There were no tornadoes. No fallen trees. The power hadn't even gone out. Just flickered a few times like a hiccup. The ravaging storm that the weathermen had predicted turned into a temper tantrum. It came close, but fell just a bit short.

Out I ventured. After learning of the planned open mic cancellation, I made my way to the Radisson hotel where author Stephanie Powell Watts was to read for a Pages and Places event. One Jack-and-Coke, a comfortable chair, and a few moments later, Watts took her place at the podium.

Watts read the first in her debut collection of short stories *We Are Taking Only What We Need* titled "Family Museum of the Ancient Postcards". Despite the chilly room and the minor microphone problems, Watts managed to engage the crowd with a great reading. Afterwards, she spoke a bit about her writing process and the completion of the collection.

Watts takes time to develop her stories and the characters within. She commented, during her reading, that "Family Museum of the Ancient Postcards", a 23-page story, took almost three years to finalize. Her process of writing is slow, by her accounts, and it's reflected within these stories in a good way. There's thought here. There's a carefully crafted image.

Southern writer. It's a title, as Watts explains, she tries not to think about while writing. It is a title for publishers, librarians, and people like me to use when describing her work. Southern writer is a title that fits, but only superficially. Her writing goes beyond the borders of the Mason-Dixon line.

This debut collection was a PEN Hemingway Award finalist and contains the short "Unassigned Territory" which won the Pushcart Prize. Many of the stories have been featured in well-known short story anthologies. And it's no wonder why.

The stories contained within *We Are Taking Only What We Need* focus on a rural setting that is most certainly intimately familiar to Watts. Criss-crossing, dusty back roads dotted by houses every few miles. The hardened lives and the people who live them. These stories focus on the lost and found. Not material, but mental and emotional.

Like the storm that threatened Scranton, though, there are a few things that make *We Are Taking Only What We Need* fall just short of what it could have been. However, I don't believe it's much of Watts's fault as it is poor editing.

Throughout the book there are errors. Glaringly obvious errors that should have never made it past an editor. Anyone who reads knows that an awkward phrase, misspelled word, or errant punctuation can completely pull you from a story. I know it does for me. It's a shame that, because of a lackluster editor, an author's work should suffer, but it does.

I also feel that a truly good editor, or publisher, would have ordered the stories differently. This, I noticed, with the first two shorts. Both began with a character just being released from jail. It's not a bad thing to start multiple stories in a similar fashion or with similar events, but to place them one after the other in such a small collection of shorts becomes detrimental, in my opinion. It can make the writing seem redundant even when it's not the case.

Maybe it's just me, but I seem to be finding slack editing in contemporary publications more and more. Maybe it's a sign of the times. Whatever it is, I hope it stops. I hope editors begin taking their jobs seriously and realizing just how important they are when it comes to a final product.

Despite the editing problems, *We Are Taking Only What We Need* is an incredible read. Watts writes with beautiful description. I can see the snaking dirt roads and taste the dust. I can feel these characters' emotions. The tension and moments of clarity. Watts has a tendency, in these stories, to bring you from a wide, breathtaking view of your surroundings and focus you in tighter and tighter until the very end where she opens the chest of her characters and lets their entire being pour out.

Pick it up and read it. My hopes, for this particular collection, are for better editing in a second printing. Fix the errors. Order the stories a bit better. But, until then, you'll have to read this version. And it's worth it.

erin says

whoever copy edited this book does not know where to hyphenate "y'all" and it bothered me incredibly much.

Will says

Stephanine Powell Watts' collection of short stories is a lovely bunch of stories following the lives of black families living in and around rural North Carolina. The stories are windows, sometimes leaving the reader feeling voyeuristic other times welcomed into the family. She writes with great success about finding belonging and trying to change routines. However, I found Powell Watts at her best writing protagonists that wanted or needed to escape their hometowns but couldn't quite figure out how. Maybe I relate to this story line more than the others but I think Watts does it with grace, accurately expressing the agony implicit in the experience. I don't know if I will walk away with any of these stories seared into my memory but it was a great little book! So easy to fall into the worlds that Watts creates and empathize with her characters! Also, great stories about black people who live in rural parts of this country!! A demographic that opinion pieces seem keen to forget about these days.

Kate says

While the story quality is a bit uneven, there's enough gems here to make it worth the read. The writing is good, the truth in the author's words are undeniable, but some of the stories meander too much or end too abruptly. The main characters of most of the short stories feel like versions of the same girl, but I liked that, it felt like a connection tying the stories together.

Eva Ebert says

Latest instalment in the LeVar Burton Reads podcast series.

This is a story of a black girl who is a Jehova's Witness and is sent out to spread the words.

Now, I'm not a fan of JW or anyone else coming to my door to disturb me, but it was interesting to read about. All the strategies and logistic that goes into preaching and handing out magazines. It's a glimpse into a world I know nothing about and that's always fascinating, while at the same time being a tender portrait of a smart, young girl who will very soon have to chose between belonging to a man or being an old maid. It's a small slice-of-life story with an ending that leaves room for more.

Audra says

I have been reading a lot of short stories because I am in the midst of writing and submitting a lot of them. With each book I read, I read the blurbs about the authors to try and get a small sense of who they are and see how their experiences shape their writing, good or bad.

We Are Taking Only What We Need is a series of short stories about the mundane things of life: teenage angst, religion, and relationships. The stories were well-written (mostly, spelling errors aside), but I found them really lacking "oomph." It was kind of like sitting on a porch listening to someone talk about the same old problems over and over without wanting to do anything to change their situation.

I hate to give bad reviews. As a pre-published author I know how much a writer puts of him or herself into their stories. But I found myself ready to be done with this book. I am still going to read her other book "No One Is Coming To Save Us" because I want to like her writing, I really do.

Page says

I received an Advanced Review Copy (ARC) of **We Are Taking Only What We Need: Stories** by Stephanie Powell Watts via Edelweiss+.

?Ten stories about everyday people dealing with the intense emotions that come with death, divorce, change, betrayal, religion, and love. Nothing about any one of these stories is altogether phenomenal, but the beauty is in their simplicity. Their brutal realness.?

The ones that stood out the most, at least for me, were *Do You Remember the Summer of Love* and *Black Power*. ?

The former is about **awoman whose recently left her husband, after discovering he's been seeing (and presumably fallen in love with a man)**; she's struggling to figure out who she is in a world where her reality consists of a man who likely never loved her, and a life where she centered all she aaa around that love. The realization that she settled for a life, that turned out to be such a lie, has made her wonder if she can even trust herself anymore.

The dialogue she has within herself, as well as with her unwitting (and a touch creepy) companion, speaks volumes as to how difficult it can be to fix yourself once you've discovered you're broken.?

The latter is much the same, only the woman in that particular story has already **decided that settling is as good an option as any, given her choices**; she dreams of something better being on the other side, but she hasn't the motivation to seek it out.

Each story offers the opportunity to reflect and discuss the thought process a woman goes through when making a decision about her happiness. You get a feel for just how hopeless and trapped one can feel when life doesn't seem to be playing fair—which is often the case.

Robert says

We Are Taking Only What We Need, a collection of stories by Stephanie Powell Watts, has a thread running through it that goes something like this: an African-American, intelligent, observant, depressed dirt-road country girl in North Carolina struggles every day, in every situation, to make sense of her feelings, her relatives, and her lack of a clear future, whether it involves a man, a job, or God.

In the best story, “There Can Never Be Another Me,” that girl is pushed aside by an older man’s continuing attraction to the wife he’s always leaving. The wife he’s always leaving, of course, is the basic girl grown older, angrier, and still as confused as ever about why men are necessary, or so damned persistent.

Watts’ setting, character and themes make me think of a white female writer who grew up in Georgia: Flannery O’Connor. What Watts lacks that O’Connor possessed, it seems to me, is a tight, explosive sense of story wrapped up in the fundamentally tragicomic wickedness of people--their vanity and greed above all.

Some of these stories are so socially fuzzy (who is related to whom? who is sleeping with whom?) that it’s a challenge for the reader to keep the narrative straight. Others are richer in the middle than in the end, when the fundamental girl just has to give up and yield to uncertainty.

The collection has several strengths: a consistent, well-controlled prose style full of vivid details; a great instinct for titles (“If You Hit Randolph County, You’ve Gone Too Far;” “Family Museum of the Ancient Postcards”); and a commitment to bringing the South’s backwoods African-American trailer-folk to the fore. Here we have prison visits, mental institution visits, and painfully accurate portrayals of people who fear they have passed the entire day not being seen.

Beverly says

My thoughts:

- I am not a big fan of short stories but have been learning how to appreciate a good short story collection and for me this works best if I read one short story per day until I finish the collection. This way I get a chance to reflect on each story and ponder on the author’s writing style.

- I was interested in reading this collection not only because it won the Ernest J Gaines Award for Literary Excellence but also because the stories were set in rural NC towns and was interested in reading stories that would reflect African American black sensibilities of living in the rural south.
 - This is a collection of gritty stories written in an unsentimental manner communicating the intimate emotions of life in rural North Carolina for African American women. The stories that expressed the lives of Jehovah Witnesses in a rural setting were the most poignant for me.
 - Great sense of place and time. “My writing has always been about trying to give voice to individuals who aren’t heard in our culture: the poor, African-American dirt-roaders that are my people,” Watts said. “In that sense, this award isn’t just for me, but for the communities I came from. I’m proud of that -- and I’m proud of them. Literature belongs to everyone.” This is a quote from the author and she definitely achieved her goal in this collection.
 - I do not expect to like all of the stories in a collection equally but got a little concerned as the first story was my least favorite but by the end of the second story – I settled into the author’s elegant writing style and was captivated by the characters she so carefully constructed and place me within their world.
 - Stephanie Powell Watts is definitely an author to watch as she writes of a people who are often not the main subject in southern literature – African American women in the current times of the rural south as they maneuver through their place in this world.
-

Dee Eisel says

Wow. Just wow, folks. So much anguish and so much familiar in one book of short stories - it makes my heart ache. Watts has given us a series of tales of Black girls and women in North Carolina, mostly in the eastern side of the state. I have met these women and girls. I have seen them hurting and turning away from their own hearts, or worse (and how could it be worse?) embracing those hearts only to feel them shatter in their breasts. They took care of my children. They tried their damndest to get through school programs that were set up to fail girls in general and them in specific. They tried to find love, but the price was so often too high.

I wept reading Watts’ stories. These are not about “strong women,” although the women in them are strong. They have to be. They’re about women who are surviving - or not. They’re about their families, which are thriving - or very much not. They’re about what happens to the children, and what happens to the brothers and lovers, the fathers and husbands. And they’re about the choices women make when they really don’t have many choices at all.

I don’t feel sorry for the women in Watts’ tales. I feel rage for them. What kind of difference could they be making in a world where we - where, to be honest, I - had not contributed to pushing them down? I was bullied on my school bus by a couple of girls like the ones in these stories. But it wasn’t until I became an adult that I understood that when my family went to the school what price those girls paid. What price Watts’ girls would have paid in the same place, same time.

I don’t have any frame of reference to understand the things that lead someone to become a devout Jehovah’s Witness. But in the white missionary women I see myself - meaning well, but so very clumsy, and unaware that we are falling, have fallen, are tripping others. Many of the stories’ protagonists share the Witness faith. It hums quietly, but didn’t stop me from loving the characters.

This is not a book of easy reads. Mental hospitals, custody disputes, suicides - this book is a trigger warning

in and of itself. But if you can, I urge you to read it. Look beyond the brutal intimacy, see the structures behind, and work to disassemble them. Just because these stories are fiction doesn't mean Watts isn't telling the harsh truth. This is the fiction to which *So You Want To Talk About Race*'s true stories leads. It's not fantasy. It's every bit as real as the singing of the cicadas in the Carolina summer that Watts summons so effortlessly. Five of five stars.

Blue says

Listened via LeVar Burton Reads podcast. (#14)

Bored. That is how I felt about most of the book. I vastly prefer world-building over character studies, although I can enjoy the latter if the item is written well/interestingly. (I like words/vocabulary and semicolons!) This was average/fair writing, ostensibly taking place as a conversation between two mostly stationary characters but was really nearly entirely in the one character's head.

I also disagreed with LeVar's interpretation of the end, and thus that his commentary probably takes away from the story. (view spoiler)
