

Kevin Crossley-Holland, *Short Too! A Second Book of Very Short Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). 96 pp.

ISBN 978-0-19-278013-3

Kevin Crossley-Holland's new collection, a long-awaited follow-up to *Short! A Book of Very Short Stories* (1998), is stunning. His considerable skills as a poet and author of demanding fiction for children come together again in forty-four brief stories that slide easily off the page and into the mind. While the collection is written primarily for children, it would be a very curmudgeonly adult who read it without admiration and pleasure.

Crossley-Holland's stories, some of which come close to poetry, draw on a wide range of genres. Many retell or are loosely based on folktales, fairy-tales, myths, and legends from around the world, often with a supernatural element. Retaining some of the conventions of these genres helps inexperienced readers, so myths, for example, are rewritten in powerful, modern language, with little overt characterization. Stories set in contemporary society, such as 'Chocolate' and 'The Hairy Woman', often create character through deft first-person narration and direct speech. I particularly like how in 'My Dead Daughter' the whining tone of a supermarket scammer – "Will you, sweetheart?" the woman asked. "That'll do my poor old heart good, that will" – hints at her insincerity and helps predict the ending. Young readers love to be one step ahead of the main character! These stories encourage them to engage with the text – and to draw on their wider understanding of real and imaginary worlds – in order to develop their own insights, filling in gaps and reading beyond the literal and the given.

Stories of this length are well-suited to a child's stamina and

concentration. They therefore offer a great model for young writers, who seldom read stories of a length and structure they are capable of emulating. The stories are also excellent for reading aloud, as the phrasing is vivid – and so clear that it is almost impossible to go wrong. However, it would be wrong to categorize *Short Too!* as just a valuable teaching resource. It is far more than that: it shows children that reading is about the pleasure and excitement of entering worlds built of words. This is the sort of book that turns children who can read into children who love reading.

Jackie Brien

Flash: The International Short-Short Story Magazine, 5.1 (April 2012), 83–84.