

Charlotte Observer:
The Brief History of the Dead (Pantheon)
By Kevin Brockmeier

Review by Mindy Friddle

Mindy Friddle is author of the novel *The Garden Angel* (St. Martin's Press) and in paperback (Picador).

Whales, giraffes, elephants, “and all the other great mammals” have died out. Infectious Agent Squads regularly search citizens on the street. Terrorism sirens go off so often, no one pays much attention. A trio of corporations—including Coca Cola—now own Antarctica where polar ice provides one of the few sources of fresh water. And then a deadly pandemic called “the Blinks” spreads across the globe. Bleak? Yep. Such is the nature of apocalyptic tales.

And yet, Kevin Brockmeier's novel, *The Brief History of the Dead*, set in the near future, is much more than a disquieting tale about the end of the world. It is a meditation on the meaning of our existence, and our connections with others and the cosmos.

The novel weaves together two stories that gradually converge: Laura Byrd, a thirty-two year old wildlife specialist who finds herself stranded in an Antarctic station, and the recently dead who inhabit a place known as “the City.”

The cosmology that underpins the novel is explained in an epigram: many African societies believe that humans are divided into the living, the dead and the “recently departed”—those who are neither living nor dead, but exist “in the memories of the living.” The living, in this case, is Laura Byrd, the protagonist. The “nearly departed” are a variety of characters who have died on earth and wait in the City, a sort of otherworldly holding bin. The City's inhabitants aren't cured of ills such as blindness, or relieved of their habits and jobs (although they no longer have heartbeats). Indeed, they seem to fill their days with the rituals and habits of the lives they left behind: “After finishing the crossing, you found a home and a job and a company of friends, ran out your six or seven decades, and while you could not raise a family, for no one aged, you could always assemble one around you.”

Laura's narrative, as she struggles to survive the brutal, merciless beautiful Antarctic, is tense and physical; in contrast, the suspense is metaphysical in the City, whose inhabitants exist only as long as they are remembered by the living on earth. Laura strikes out, braving the elements, in search of her colleagues and any human survivors. She finds, instead, that she may be the last person on earth. Meanwhile, with “The Blinks” decimating the earth's population, the City shrinks-- since there is no one left on earth to keep memories alive—no one, that is, except Laura Byrd. Gradually, it dawns on the remaining assortment of characters in the City, that they have something in common: they are being kept there through the memories of Laura.

There is quite a constellation of characters in the City—mailmen, teachers, Laura’s parents, the homeless, virologists, street preachers, corporate executives--and Brockmeier skillfully conveys their individual memories and frustrations. Melancholy, curious, resigned, the inhabitants of the city ruminate about the ordinary lives they left behind, and manage to connect (and reconnect) with others, rekindle marriages, or just hang out in parks, wondering if they will disappear when the last living person on earth who remembers them finally dies.

The first chapter of *The Brief History of the Dead* appeared as a story in the New Yorker in September 2003. Since its publication, the novel has been compared to everything from *The Terminator*, to Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones*, to Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Certainly, with its suspenseful, futuristic setting, and multifaceted characters, *The Brief History of the Dead* defies traditional categories. The author nimbly straddles science fiction and literary traditions to create an original work—haunting, unsettling, and thoroughly entertaining.

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