

BLACKJACKS & BLUE DEVILS

by Jerry Wilson

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A review by Donald Dewey

“Always the dust. Dust an inch thick in this very room. Dust in the food. Eyes full of dust. Dust in the bed, between bodies. Having babies in the dust. Hens dying right and left, choked by dust. It was awful” (12).

You get the idea. Dust coats the souls of the Oklahoma characters in Jerry Wilson's fourteen-story collection, *Blackjacks & Blue Devils*. The few exceptions have been vacuumed clean of just about everything but the dread of standing in one place too long and becoming vulnerable to another coating.

No, there aren't too many laughs in Wilson's Oklahoma. Don't look outside its borders for them, either: what little there is of the world beyond is the historical march of the wars America engaged in from Europe and the Pacific to Vietnam and Iraq and the physical and mental wounds veterans brought home with them from one end of the 20th century to the other. But none of this grimness would necessarily be fatal if the tales were truly short stories. Unfortunately, too many of them are dense in mood but flimsy in heft, coming off as mere sketches requiring fuller exploration. Least persuasive of all are tales such as “Class Reunion” in which the author—maybe exhausted by his own gloom—leaps to an implausible fancy for a romantic conclusion that the narrative hasn't earned.

There are exceptions. In “The Price of Land,” Elmer Weber returns from World War II minus an arm to discover that a Mr. Potter-like banker is about to foreclose on the holding his parents can no longer hold. Elmer's solution is to grip the banker's throat with his

one good hand and force down a deal to price his missing arm at a value that in so many months will cover his parents' debt. Is it believable? Will the banker call the sheriff as soon as Elmer has left the story? Unlike in "Class Reunion," it doesn't matter because Wilson has made Elmer matter.

There are also a couple of compelling stories with young boys as protagonists. In "That Old Time Religion," Adrian and Jake, who take their Kool-Aid straight as powder, become caught up in a revival meeting in which the spoken theme is mercy but its delivery is pure damnation. Adrian and Jake are awed, then frightened, then absolutely terrified, but not so paralytically that they can't make their escape back to their reassuring homes. The only problem Adrian sees is the darkness behind him.

In "Bootlegger's Revenge," Arlo and his friend Alfred sneak up on Hally Deeter's still and blow it up. As the author informs us in all but passing, it's not just a prank but Arlo's solution to preventing his father from getting drunk and reeling back home to beat up the boy and his mother.

Given the arid passivity of most of Wilson's adult protagonists, it might not be a coincidence that the tales with the younger protagonists have an animation otherwise largely missing in the collection. For Adrian and Arlo, the dust hasn't yet settled.