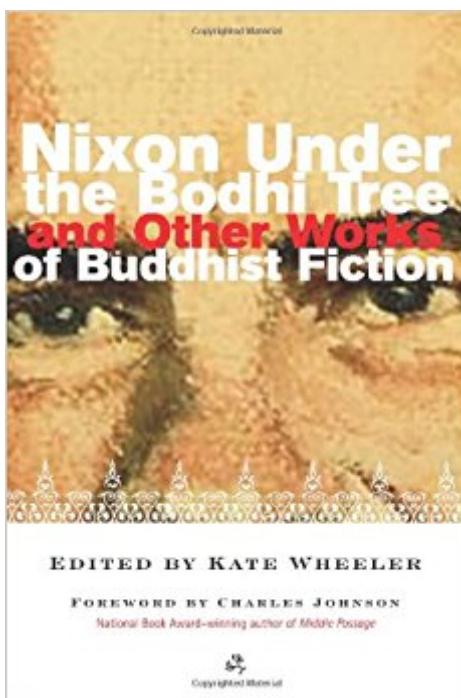


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Nixon Under The Bodhi Tree And Other Works Of Buddhist Fiction



Synopsis

Pico Iyer, Victor Pelevin, Doris Dorrie and other renowned contributors join young award-winners in what National Book Award-winner Charles Johnson calls "an embarrassment of literary riches," sure to please fiction lovers of every stripe. From the O. Henry Award-winning title story, to visionary short-shorts and barely fictionalized personal memoirs, Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree is inventive, exciting, and unlike any collection before it.

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Customer Reviews

"Buddhist fiction" is a contradictory notion, admits Wheeler, a Buddhist practitioner and recipient of two O. Henry awards. "Everything that seems to be happening to 'you' and 'me' is already like a fiction, from a Buddhist's standpoint, and the thing to do is to unravel your involvement in the story, not become entranced and follow it to the end," she explains. Yet she also admits that the Buddhist tradition is rich in stories, especially in the teaching of the sutras. Best to sidestep the spiritual quagmire of this discussion, and just relish the beauty of these well-told tales. Wheeler has assembled a stellar collection, including the titular "Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree," an O. Henry award-winning story by Gerald Reilly. Many stories, with their Zen sparseness, clean imagery and lingering depths, could proudly stand beside the finest of the genre, such as the fiction of Gail Tsukiyama. Marie Henry's half-page story, "At the Change of Seasons," is so spare and profound it reads like a haiku that's been gently stretched into prose. Some speak so intimately to the teachings of Buddhism that they read like inside jokes—which isn't necessarily a bad

thing, considering how satisfying these jokes are to insiders. For instance, Dinty W. Moore's exquisitely joyful two-page story about reality and illusion ("No Kingdom of the Eyes") could be lost on nonpractitioners, but will easily elicit a chuckle from many struggling students of Buddhism. Another standout is Ira Sukrungruang's classic tale, "The Golden Mix," a commanding, crass and earthy story about what might happen if Buddha showed up at the local dog pound. This collection is all that fans of fiction and Buddhism hope for—full of play, insight, revelation and diversity, and never compromising in delight. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"You'll relish the beauty of these well-told tales. Wheeler has assembled a stellar collection, one that fans of fiction and Buddhism hope for--full of play, insight, revelation, and diversity, and never compromising in delight." (Publishers Weekly)"This marvelous collection of nearly 30 specimens of Buddhist fiction shows not only the promise of a genre that is scarcely known as such, but what has already been accomplished by the small but growing band of writers melding the truth of dharma with the invention of fiction. From German filmmaker-novelist Doris Dorrie's unflinching depiction of the 'sheer torture' of meditation to an excerpt from Keith Kachtick's remarkable 2003 novel 'Hungry Ghost', and from works shorter than a page to stories that run several thousand words, the pieces here explore the mundane and the metaphysical with cold eyes and warm hearts. Together, they comprise a captivating view of the landscape of mindfulness." (Yoga Journal)"A milestone in Buddhist fiction. . . . Vigilant readers may have noticed a growing number of novels with Buddhist themes, but you won't see a Buddhist fiction shelf in bookstores. It's out there, but it hasn't been easy to find. Until now. In *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree*, Kate Wheeler has assembled a marvelous collection of stories, inspired, in one way or another, by Buddhism. They range in length from a few lines to several thousand words, and cover topics as diverse as driving, acting, politics, food, birth, rebirth, love, death, murder, suicide, animal adoption, and lawn mowing. Certain themes emerge--we meet monks and nuns and earnest and not-so-earnest meditators--but there are plenty of surprises. As novelist and scholar Charles Johnson writes in his elegant foreword, these stories succeed because they 'dramatize the dharma by taking us intimately into the loves of their characters,' and show us 'how the Buddhist experience is simply the human experience.' This volume is surely a milestone in Western Buddhist literature--and a book that fiction lovers, Buddhist or otherwise will very much enjoy." (Tricycle)"Poetry & painting yes, but Buddhist fiction? Well, the Chinese and Japanese have been at it for centuries. Now Kate Wheeler has provided a collection of Western-style short stories, homegrown and full of vernacular salt. You'll want to keep this on the

shelf with Kerouac." (Andrew Schelling, Naropa University, author of *Wild Form*, *Savage Grammar*) "This fine collection of stories introduces a strikingly diverse range of voices who tell their tales with warmth and wit. I enjoyed it very much." (Stephen Batchelor, author of *Buddhism without Beliefs*) "The twenty-nine short stories stimulate the reader to consider the multifarious paths to the awakened mind. All of them address classic Buddhist concepts, yet do so in the most contemporary of ways, [raising] awareness of how Buddhist practice and interpretation are experienced in the West. [Wheeler's] personal and professional experience infuses the collection with both breadth and depth." (ForeWord) "An extraordinary collection. These beautifully crafted stories are poignant, ironic, compassionate and inspiring. They are a testimony to the ability of the literary imagination to provide glimpses of the mystical dimension of everyday life and the thusness of existence. They illuminate the beauty, frailty and yearning of the human soul." (Jeremy D. Safran, Editor of *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*) "The first anthology of a budding genre: Buddhist fiction. Some of the short stories here are autobiographical; others play off the travelogue idiom and portray-- with some interesting twists-- spiritual seekers in distant lands. More often they take place in everyday America: an urban stoop, the beach, a job interview. The stories here are diverse, and intriguing." (Buddhadharma) "This strange and startling anthology is a welcome effort. There are many moments of beauty in these stories. Whether you are a Buddhist practitioner or just a fiction lover, you'll want to read them with pen in hand, underlining an effective phrase or flash of literary insight. A significant debut collection." (Shambhala Sun) "Kate Wheeler is one of my favorite writers, and now I see what a good editor she is too. I love the concept of *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree*, and found so many of the pieces surprising, intriguing, and even mind-opening." (Sandy Boucher, author of *Dancing in the Dharma* and *Discovering Kwan Yin*)

This book has such a wide array of stories in a genre that seems to be developing in the U.S. in the last few years. If one has a spiritual orientation, and has enjoyed fiction, it becomes hard to read the kind of books that are oriented towards mystery stories, high tension dramas, tales of romance, etc. They just are rather hollow after your orientation changes. Yet texts on teachings also run out of gas after a while: you know what the map looks like, there's no need to keep reading the manual. Some which are oriented more to inspiration than instruction are still nourishing. Poetry in the spiritual mode is also good but usually just a brief touch. But this collection of fiction presented by this host of different presenters is quite powerful. The outlook is primarily Buddhist but many of the stories are just presenting an aspect of the fundamental questions of existence and the "Buddhist" part does not even apply. It's just looking at our aliveness from many viewpoints. Not everything will be loved

by every reader but there is so much variation in the orientation and style that it makes you look forward to each new offering as it comes up. Also, an unexpected gift was that these offerings led me to explore other writings of some of the writers: for example, Pico Iyer, and Francesca Hampton (her "Greyhound Bodhisattva" is stunning. There are many other treats here and the impact of many of the stories is quite wonderful.

Fun read.

Since the first time I checked this book out of my local library I've checked it out again so many times that I finally decided to just purchase my own copy. There are many great short stories in this collection and two that blew me away. One I read out loud at different times to both my children and girlfriend and wrote the author a note of thanks.

What's this first-ever anthology of "Buddhist fiction" offer? Editor Kate Wheeler comments how according to dharma, everything's already a fiction; stories represent "a redoubled version of the existential mistake that lies at the heart of all suffering." (xiv) Still, traditions in Buddhism tell stories, and the ones here come from contemporary writers, a few well-known, many humbler practitioners. I preferred the longer stories to the shorter-- they can range from the standout not-quite holiday in Cambodia "Beheadings" by Kira Salek at thirty-four pages and the fine first chapter from Keith Katchick's ambitious novel "Hungry Ghost" (see my review) to three-paragraph glimpses of insight. I liked the stories that took on the curious predicaments of people trying to learn about Buddhism or attempting to practice it while questioning its estranging qualities in daily life; those by some writers from within the tradition tended to be less gripping, perhaps from insider's situations unfamiliar to me. Some entries appeared to be memoirs rather than fiction. Sharon Cameron's essay on meditation in its disorienting intensity seems not so much fiction as self-dramatization; Anne Carolyn Klein's account of translation appears non-fiction; Pico Iyer's excerpt from his Japan narrative feels factual. Others by certain, higher-profile writers may have been chosen more on their content or the reputation of their contributors rather than merit that a "blind" selection process might have selected, I suspect. Some of these, taking place in monasteries or on retreats, appear aimed at the likely audience already in the know. Still, especially for experienced students and teachers, I suppose many of these entries might satisfy-- the key verb for inclusion Wheeler notes--most readers. Gerald Reilly's title story and M.J. Huang's parable "Rebirth," start off this collection promisingly. Ira Sukrungruang's "The Golden Mix" keeps the oddness of its setting, an animal shelter, and its visitor

without becoming cloying or cute-- which in less skillful hands could have decayed. Instead, we get this easygoing, yet unsettling, tale in everyday dialogue and ordinary Midwestern settings infused with a bit of mystery. Such offbeat, without being coy, moments enrich Francesca Hampton's "Greyhound Bodhisattva" and Easton Waller's "The War Against the Lawns," paired well together, as are many entries as arranged by Wheeler. Salek's inquiring narrator takes us into the longest story, "Beheadings," which in the best manner feels as if told to us first-hand, as real life. It concludes perfectly. Seeking her brother in Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge still occupy parts of the territory, she looks for her vanished, damaged, suffering brother. "David might have said my karma was good, though he couldn't have known how much I tempted the world. How much I hated it for its senseless parcelling of benevolence and pain." This tough-mindedness, in Reilly, Huang, Sukrungruang, Hampton, Waller, and Salek, makes this anthology at its strongest far from a sentimental or pat assembly of platitudes. Buddhism upends many from their meditation mats. In some of the best stories, these challenging rather than comforting teachings are confronted and puzzled over by those on the outside looking in, in more ways than one. Victor Pelevin's "The Guest at the Feast of Bon" shows why his postmodern novels attract a cult following. I can't give away much, but this reminded me of his Russian forebears, or Hesse or Camus, in his philosophical reflections merged into an eerie meditation. "We call God that which we are not yet capable of killing, but once we have killed it, the matter is closed." (237) Killing one's self, the narrator reflects, "is an attempt to kill the God dwelling within us. We are punishing him for condemning us to torment, we are attempting to match him in omnipotence, we may even usurp his function by putting a sudden end to the puppet show he began." This existential tale takes on Japan, St. Sebastian, belief, death, and dragons and it ends as the penultimate entry in this collection hauntingly.

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