

Book Talk

My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry by Fredrik Backman

Translated by Henning Koch

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Reviewed by Ken Wilkins

Don't just scratch the surface

Fredrik Backman's novel *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* opens with Granny and Elsa together in the police station at 1:30 in the morning, having been picked up for breaking into the zoo. Granny is 77 and Elsa is 7, and they are best friends. Now, Granny is a little "perky," which means difficult, and she just might be a bit crazy. The word precocious doesn't do Elsa justice. But her brains make her different, and she's bullied at school. Granny makes it her mission to help her handle being different and to learn how to defeat bullies.

Just when the reader is basking in the obvious love these two have for each other, Granny dies from cancer—way too early in the book. *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell you She's Sorry* is a mixture of realism and fantasy, with a little Harry Potter thrown in for good measure. Elsa, you see, is a big Potter fan.

Granny leaves Elsa with a mission: to deliver letters of apology. Although she gives Elsa the first letter, the others must be found—it's a treasure hunt. As the set-up continues, we meet the characters who live in the apartment building that Granny turns out to own. And these folks are the message that Backman wants to deliver to us.

Each of them is a bit off somehow. Kent and Britt-Marie are materialistic and manipulative, and Britt-Marie in particular is a passive-aggressive witch. There is an alcoholic woman, a "monster" who we would say suffers from PTSD, a very large dog, and several others. Elsa finds and delivers all the letters, and through her odyssey we get a more rounded picture of the characters, and eventually meet a real monster.

What we learn is that the real trick of life is to realize that people are human—and imperfect. If they seem at first to be all bad, one must not fail to look beneath the surface to understand the entire person. In the novel, Britt-Marie and her first love gave up on each other; Kent married another woman, was divorced, and returned to marry Britt-Marie. Knowing this and other bits of her history goes a long way to explaining why she is the way she is, and makes us not hate her. Not to spoil the novel, I'll leave it to you to learn the others' stories.

My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry is a book that's difficult to characterize, and Backman does a good job of creating more than one reality. Some critics have bemoaned the fact that our narrator is only 7 (almost 8) and therefore lacking life experience to go along with brains. I agree that one can only suspend disbelief so much. Nevertheless, Backman pulls off this parlor trick without a hitch, so the reader doesn't get bogged down by the child.

We're all "different," and certainly none of us is perfect. Backman asks us to look beyond the surface to see the complete person. If we do, he suggests, then more often than not we'll find a person we can like very much. Here, you'll find a novel that you can like very much.

Get to Know John Brodman

(Continued from page 26)

Sylvia, to whom John has been married for 27 years, is also active in the community. She is currently serving a second term on the Board of Directors at The Country Club of the Crystal Coast, where she is an avid golfer and tennis player. Sylvia is a past member of the board of PIKSCO homeowners association, and a member of CERT and Volunteers in Police Service (VIPS). The Brodmans have two sons, Larry Bradshaw, living in McLean, Virginia, and Wayland Campbell Brodman, living in Florida with John and Sylvia's two grandsons.

When asked what people might be surprised to know about him, John offered the following. Those who know him are well aware of his fondness for sports and for food and wine. While he tries to include some rigorous exercise in every day, such as biking, walking, pickleball and swimming—mixed in with occasional trips to the gym—he admits that he would rather talk wine. John explains that he got his "Ph.D." in wine while living in Paris, where his home had a 3000-bottle cave (wine cellar), whose contents he brought home to the States with him. They're all gone now, and he regrets being reduced to having to hunt through the provincial offerings of local supermarket wine aisles like everyone else.

While the Brodmans have no specific plans for the future, John thinks he might soon be ready to try retirement again and do his best to not flunk it this time—or not.

This is the second in a series of Shoreline articles designed to get to know our commissioners better. Thanks to them for taking the time to share with us.—The Editors

Bogotá Revisited

By John Clarke

Our daughter, Jessica, works for the State Department and has been deployed to work in Bogotá for the past two years. She and her family have not been able to join us here for Thanksgiving or Christmas so we decided to visit them instead. Also, and maybe even more important, they were expecting their second child in mid-November, making it a perfect time to visit. Grandson Dylan did not comply with his due date, so we arrived a couple of days after his birth.

We packed some items in our luggage to help with bringing Thanksgiving to them. Pumpkin pie ingredients are not available there, nor are pecans. Unfortunately, we didn't include Karo Syrup in our supplies and the substitute we tried from the local supermarket produced a pretty awful-tasting pie.



Anne and John Clarke with their granddaughter and new grandson in Bogotá, Colombia.

—Photo courtesy of the Clarkes

The most important part of our job on this trip was to help with all that goes on with a new baby and enjoy the preparation and cooking that goes along with Thanksgiving. Sightseeing was not going to be as big a part of this trip, but we would still be able to get out in the city to shop. Markets are very close by, so one can shop each day for fresh food to prepare the meals. Bogotá is a very large city, similar to New York, so you can imagine the type of density of living that goes on there.

In Pine Knoll Shores, an evening of horn blowing never prevents one from sleeping, but even at seven floors off the street, in Bogotá one can hear everything. Traffic begins to slow down after about 1 a.m., and a small window of solitude occurs before the noise and congestion start again around 5 a.m. Colombians love to blow their car horns at the most minor inconvenience, so you can imagine the sounds. Fortunately, little babies must be somewhat immune to all that racket, as Dylan slept quite well except for the need to eat.

Being equatorial, the weather rarely changes and the amount of daylight and darkness are almost equivalent each day. Positioned 8,500 feet above sea level, Bogotá is cool in the morning, with temperatures in the high 40s to mid-50s. It warms up to around 70 or so during the day, but as soon as the sun goes down around 6 p.m., the temperature drops right back down. The town, perched on a large plain surrounded by mountains, offers great scenery and some "energetic" hills along the walkways. The first few days there one must try to get acclimated to the elevation, as often it is a struggle to catch one's breath.

The trip from the family's apartment to the busy street below, Septima (caratterra 7), is a quick elevation change. Thankfully, once on Septima, the walking is easy and the sights enjoyable. Bogotá has as many people as New York City, but few buildings above 20 stories (as opposed to skyscrapers) so there are a lot more apartment buildings throughout the town.

(Continued on page 28)