



## Better Times

*Sara Batkie*

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## **Better Times** Sara Batkie

Winner of the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction, the stories in *Better Times* focus on what's happening in places people don't think to look. Women, sometimes displaced, often lonely, are at the heart of these stories. In *Better Times* Sara Batkie focuses on the moments in women's lives when the wider world is wrapped up in other matters: a father and daughter, separated by time and an ocean, dreaming of each other; a girl in a home for "troubled women" imagining the journey of the first dog in space; a phantom breast returning to haunt a woman after her mastectomy; a young woman giving birth to a litter of eggs. Such are the ordinary women weathering extraordinary circumstances in *Better Times*.

Divided into three sections covering the recent past, our current era, and the world to come, the stories gathered here—with characters stymied by loneliness, motherhood, illness, even cataclysmic climate change—interrogate the idea that so-called better times ever existed, particularly for women.

## **Better Times Details**

Date : Published September 1st 2018 by University of Nebraska Press

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Author : Sara Batkie

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# From Reader Review Better Times for online ebook

## **Sidik Fofana says**

SIX WORD REVIEW: Masterful storytelling--knows her own powers.

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## **Lori L (She Treads Softly) says**

Better Times by Sara Batkie is a highly recommended collection of nine short stories and the winner of the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Fiction.

The stories in the collection are divided into three parts, with four stories set in the past, four from the present, and one set in the future. All of the stories feature women or girls, and the experiences or an event they have already gone through in their lives. They are facing depression, uncertain futures, trials or illness and must find their way through the world with the baggage they have already collected.

The writing is quite extraordinary and it is clear why this is an award-winning collection. As with any compilation of short stories, there are hits and misses based on the tastes of individual readers, but it is safe to say that the majority of the stories in this short collection were winners for me.

### **Part One: The Recent Past**

When Her Father Was an Island: A Japanese girl's father is declared MIA after WWII. While she learns to live without him, he continues to serve his country and fight the battle on an unnamed island.

Laika: It is 1957 and a girl in a home for trouble women contemplates the fate of Laika, the first dog in space.

Foreigners: Rebecca, a depressed, divorced mother with a recalcitrant, delinquent teenage son watches out her front window as her Russian neighbor, Anya Demidov, is being arrested. Anya and her husband are being charged with espionage.

No Man's Land: It is the first summer of Desert Storm and Lucinda, 8, and her sister Addie, 6, are living in Fort Dix, N.J. where their father is a senior drill sergeant. It is also the summer her parent's separated.

### **Part Two: The Modern Age**

Cleavage: Nan, 28, has a mastectomy and struggles with her sexuality along with feeling her phantom removed breast.

North Country, Early Morning: Grace narrates the story of the night two masked armed men planned to rob the emergency room. When the drug delivery is delayed, they force everyone who is working into a stockroom.

Departures: Betsey likes to snoop through the mail of her neighbor, Fabienne, which is how she comes into the possession of the funeral announcement.

Lookaftering: A young woman, Louisa, gives birth to three eggs in a pale lilac color, and undertakes taking care of them.

### **Part Three: The World to Come**

Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed: The ground beneath Sherwood, Alaska split in two, breaking a piece off into the ocean. The nine townspeople who are now stuck on the ice floe struggle with their uncertain survival.

Disclosure: My review copy was courtesy of the University of Nebraska Press.  
<http://www.shetreadssoftly.com/2018/0...>

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### **Rhonda Lomazow says**

Short lyrical stories stories that drew me in from first pages w. Each story a heart wrenching gem. For lovers of short stories for all readers of fine literature this is a wonderful read. Thanks #u of Nebraska #netgalley, for advance copy,

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### **Heather Larocchia says**

Favorites:

1. Laika
2. Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed
3. North Country, Early Morning

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### **Caroline says**

4.25 stars

I discovered this book by chance on my local library's new arrivals section of their website, and I'm glad I stumbled across it! This collection was a great palate cleanser after Florida, because there was a lot more variety (both subject-wise and tonally) in the stories. There are some through-lines of course (memory, climate change, and the emotional consequences of war were the big ones), but every story felt distinct and well-developed. I enjoyed the elements of fabulism that were sprinkled throughout the collection, but the purely realist stories were successful, too.

The first story, "When Her Father was an Island," was giving me Kazuo Ishiguro vibes (The Buried Giant specifically). It was a melancholy and beautiful story.

The parts in "Laika" that were about the protagonist researching the real-life Laika were surprisingly moving (I'm an animal lover, what can I say), and that story had one of the most impressive and impactful endings I've seen in a while.

"Foreigners" started off strong, but was one of the few stories in this collection that just didn't quite work for me in the end (I feel like Batkie lost the narrative thread in the last couple of pages).

"No Man's Land" is about the strain of wartime and the chafing of traditional gender roles with feminism/modernization. It's a story about divorce that takes a wider view.

I can't say I enjoyed "Cleavage," mostly because of subject matter and my own squeamishness, but there was still some great craft at play. I think my main issue with it was that I didn't find the actions of the characters very believable.

Actually, speaking of The Buried Giant, there were echoes of it in "North Country, Early Morning," too. It was just a more nihilistic version. (This is not to say that I think Batkie was borrowing from Ishiguro, just that the tone of their works feel very similar to me. I think I'll be remembering these stories vividly the same way I remember that novel).

"Departures" was a trip. It felt like the most traditional story to me, but that's not a criticism. I enjoyed it! It's a story of mistaken (stolen, really) identity.

"Lookaftering" is where the fabulism starts to really come into play. And yet somehow it felt like a quieter, more subtle story than a lot of the others. The basic premise is that a woman is surprised to find that she has laid eggs and obviously has... concerns.

The last story, "Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed" is a climate change tale. It's a bit uneven, but in some ways it feels like Batkie's standout story. I think she has a way of revealing surprising aspects of humanity in her characters that is definitely on display in this final story. I appreciated the unexpected thoughts and actions. I love when a story keeps me on my toes.

Overall, this was a great collection about loneliness and the lengths people will go to (or not) to avoid being forgotten and unknown. I look forward to reading more from Batkie in the future.

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### **Danny says**

Absolutely thrilled to have been able to read this in a collection after getting parts piecemail over the years. Sara has a way of prodding the events of a character's past and present to expose how much one moment in time can damage a person's ability to function in society and how that event changes their reactions to daily life.

Favorite stories: Foreigners, Laika, Those who left and those who stayed, Cleavage.

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### **AC says**

A deeply effecting short story collection by a writer who has voice. Batkie travels through time and into the future to portray women who are seekers. They've lost something. Many don't know what they've lost. Batkie succeeds in keeping the reader wanting more. Emotional stories that span the historical and the absurd. Part Munro and part Saunders. Thoroughly enjoyable.

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### **Sara Batkie says**

100% biased review for you.

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