



# At the Mouth of the River of Bees

*Kij Johnson*

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## **At the Mouth of the River of Bees** Kij Johnson

A sparkling debut collection from one of the hottest writers in science fiction: her stories have received the Nebula Award the last two years running. These stories feature cats, bees, wolves, dogs, and even that most capricious of animals, humans, and have been reprinted in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, *Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year*, and *The Secret History of Fantasy*. **Kij Johnson's** stories have won the Sturgeon and World Fantasy awards. She has taught writing; worked at Tor, Dark Horse, and Microsoft; worked as a radio announcer; run bookstores; and waitressed in a strip bar.

### Contents:

The Man Who Bridged the Mist (2011)

Wolf Trapping (1989)

The Empress Jingu Fishes (2004)

The Bitey Cat (2012)

Chenting, in the Land of the Dead (1999)

My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire—Exposition on the Flaws in my Spouse's Character—The Nature of the Bird—The Possible Causes—Her Final Disposition (2007)

Schrödinger's Cathouse (1993)

Names for Water (2010)

Fox Magic (1993)

Spar (2009)

The Horse Raiders (2000)

26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss (2008)

At the Mouth of the River of Bees (2003)

The Evolution of Trickster Stories among the Dogs of North Park after the Change (2007)

The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles (2009)

Ponies (2010)

## **At the Mouth of the River of Bees Details**

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## From Reader Review At the Mouth of the River of Bees for online ebook

### M— says

All of these stories are exquisite. And reading them is like reading razors. You don't even feel the cut, then suddenly you're bleeding.

Very highly recommended.

An ARC of this book in PDF format was provided to me by the publisher, given through the LibraryThing Early Reviewers Program.

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### Nikki says

Not sure what I thought of this collection as a whole. Some of the stories were gems -- and I say that even of ones that are dark and shudder-inducing, like Spar -- while others made little impression on me. Kij Johnson's writing seems carefully considered and paced, words doled out in just the right amounts, but it doesn't really shine for me in general. A case of "it's not you, it's me"?

The ones that will stick in my head are Spar (gross, but visceral and intriguing, if that's the right word), 26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss (I like the structure of it, the mystery of it), and The Man Who Bridged The Mist (slower-paced, with an odd climax, but characters I could get interested in and a world I could wonder about). I also wonder about the Orientalism going on here, though. Johnson seems to feel a connection to Japan and its culture, but I wonder about how deep it goes or whether it just caters to the ~oooh kitsune and manga and Japan oh my~ trend -- knowingly or unknowingly, I'm not ascribing motives. I'd rather read these stories from a Japanese woman.

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### Kaitlin says

I was very kindly given this collection by one of my wonderful friends, Mercedes, for Christmas and I have to say I am so happy that I decided to just dive into it. I have been meaning to try out some magical realism or short story collections for quite a while now, and yet haven't known quite where to begin, but I think that this is a wonderful start-point and it has a real mix of stories, voices and bizarre little plots.

Magical Realism is, to me, a fairly 'real' world with one or two things which are out of the ordinary in some way and seeing each of these stories and how different they all are proves that this is a very wide genre indeed. I think that some of my favourite stories from the collection include: Fox Magic, The Horse Raiders, Ponies and The Cat Who Walked A Thousand Miles but honestly nearly all of them were 5\* reads with only one or two getting a 4\*s which meant I had to give it a 5\* rating overall.

I'm not going to go into much detail about what each story involves as I think that this is something you should go and discover for yourself, but I will say that Kij Johnson can really write and her prose, lyricism and tone of voice was always spot on. She embodies each of the characters in the stories, no matter how

different or peculiar they are, and manages to make each one feel genuine, emotional and most importantly real.

The stories themselves range from an adventurous cat, a bridge over a misty expanse, love stories, stories of horrors unimaginable, creatures, monkeys and much, much more. I will say that some of them are brutal and disturbing to think about, but all of them are truly beautiful to read and the way that they flow from one into the next into the next was pretty seamless.

On the whole I think this would be a marvellous starting point for anyone wanting to try out Magical Realism or Short Stories as it's a beautiful collection and thank you again Mercedes for getting this collection for me :) A solid 5\*s!

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## **Alexandra says**

Turns out I have loved Kij Johnson longer than I thought I had. I first remember reading something of hers and being blown away with "Spar," in 2009. Except, though, it turns out she wrote "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss," which I read and adored (possibly unreasonably) in 2008. And

now I own these two and a whole bunch of other glorious work in this fabulous collection. Also, "Ponies."

"26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss" is told in 24 parts of varying length and purpose. It revolves around Aimee, who one day became the owner/manager/carer of a troupe of 26 monkeys (well, 25 monkeys and a primate), who travel the fairs and carnivals of America (127 in a year, with time off for Christmas) performing their routine... which ends with them disappearing from a bathtub. It's a story of the unexpected things in life and how they are the things which can matter most; that the things we love don't have to make sense, and it's ok when they don't. Life has loss and love and discovery. And, sometimes, monkeys. (And a primate.) I love, LOVE, this story.

"Fox Magic" is one example of Johnson's penchant for Japan and Japanese culture and myth. Here, a fox falls in love with a man, and the magic is to make it reciprocal. This, of course, has Repercussions. One thing I admired about this story in particular is that the fox maiden is mostly very aware of the doubled world created by the magic. There is little pretence that the magic has made everything (some things, yes, but not everything) different. Also, it confronts some of the detrimental repercussions, beyond the fox and her beloved. This sort of honesty and, well, bluntness is a bit of a hallmark of Johnson's.

"Names for Water" is utterly unlike the previous two stories - which, let's face it, is also a hallmark of Johnson's stories. You never quite know what you're going to get. This one... well, it could be read as a reason for keeping up your studies; it could be read as a meditation on the long-term and unexpected consequences of small things, and on the inter-connectedness of the universe. Johnson takes the idea of static on a phone call and... goes places. It's also lovely how many names for water she includes.

"The Bitey Cat" is a fairly unpleasant little story - that is, well written, but the narrative itself is not nice. A little girl and her bitey cat and the trouble they get into. It's dark with the sort of darkness that you can only talk about with childhood.

"The Horse Raiders" is also dark, this time the sort of dark you get when a story's about, well, horse raiders;

a planet where things are not going that well, where communication between different groups has broken down, and different groups have very different sets of values. Katia's family are nomads, travelling with their horse herd; she is the vet. Tragedy strikes and she must adapt, through pain and difficulty and anger, to a new life. One of the most intriguing parts of the whole story is the concept of n'dau. The world here turns so slowly that it is possible, being a nomad, to always be where a person and her shadow are matched in height; a right place. I love this idea of the psychic matching the landscape.

This is not a generally happy collection, is it? Brilliant, but by no means happy. "Dia Chjerman's Tale" is in some ways the impersonal story of an entire planet - one that is theoretically part of an empire, and has contact with an alien race, and the repercussions of that. But it is also a heartbreaking personal story, as the opening indicates; Dia Chjerman is the 27-times grandmother of the woman relating the tale, who is now living those repercussions. Yeh. Personal and political, hello.

On a completely different note is "My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire - Exposition on the Flaws in my Wife's Character - The Nature of the Bird - The Possible Causes - Her Final Disposition." For a start, oh that title. This is Johnson playing with what I think of as 19th-century prose that's quite different from her normal style. And it is clever. Oh, so clever. Nice layers, nice inversions.

It took me a little while to fully understand the joke that Johnson was making with "Schrodinger's Cathouse," but I got there. It's a one-shot trick, but she does play it out nicely.

After those slightly more lighthearted tales, it is back to the bleaker side with "Chenting, in the Land of the Dead." Choices that we make, and how perception is everything, how even when the outcome appears exactly the same for two people it's not - it's really not. She's good at gently and softly and smilingly breaking your heart, Johnson.

I seem to be coming across tales of prophecy a lot recently. "The Empress Jingu Fishes" deals with that ever-vexed question of if you know the future, can and should you change it? Does trying to change it lead to exactly the foreseen outcome? Ah predestination; it will never cease to be a human challenge.

"At the Mouth of the River of Bees" is, I think, my really Great Big Discovery of this collection. It's glorious and bewildering and comforting and inexplicable. It's another story of a woman who makes a choice even though she doesn't understand what motivates it, or where it will lead - in fact even though she knows that it might be a bit crazy. Like following a river of bees. I did not want this story to end, although when it did it was absolutely perfect.

"Story Kit" is one of those stories with multiple strands that don't immediately seem to connect with one another at all until... and then... oh yes. The story of Dido and Aeneas; lists of reactions, of words, books; an author's notes on her attempts to compose a story, the decisions she makes, the consequences around her. I suspect this is very much a writer's story. I love this sort of playing with structure, through short stories.

"Wolf Trapping" is a story of obsession and the desire to belong, and ways in which that can go wrong. I don't know where Lake Juhl is, or even if it's real, but Johnson made me feel cold just reading about it - and glad to live in a country with no wolves. And also glad not to experience the sort of obsession that might drive someone to want to be a wolf. Interestingly, she doesn't actually make that much attempt to explain that; it just demands to be accepted at face value, and if you can't - well. Too bad.

"Ponies." How I dislike "Ponies." I appreciate that it is well written, but I just cannot like it. It's just too, too unpleasant. Not least because on a symbolic level, it's just too too real.

The last 130-some pages is made up of four stories; one quite short, the others novellas (I think). This is an interesting choice of structure; I would have thought you would want to spread the long ones out a bit more.

Anyway, not my decision! I am conflicted by "The Cat Who walked a Thousand Miles." It's a rambling sort of story, and isn't fantasy or sf - unless one counts the idea of self-aware cats as fantasy. Maybe that does fit. Anyway, it's Japan, and has to leave its home. It has adventures... cat adventures, anyway, involving mice and lakes. It is captivating prose - it's lovely - but... it's kinda boring. The plot's not that interesting, but neither are there particularly absorbing character developments or discoveries. Maybe this just isn't the story for me.

... and then there's "Spar." Oh, "Spar." A story that might have been written in order to answer the question, "can a story that revolves entirely around sex actually explore interesting issues?" with an "absolutely." Because the story does just that - revolve around sex between a human and an alien - and explores questions of identity, and belonging, and communication, and ohmyhowcouldwehopetotalktoaliens? It's squicky, that's for sure, but it's masterful too.

Penultimately comes "The Man Who Bridged the Mist," and here I gave to admit that the first time I read this I skimmed it and did not appreciate it. It was while reading for the Hugos, and it seemed so long and a bit dull and... yeh. I skimmed. And, it turns out, I missed a lot. It is long; it's a novella, it's allowed to be. But things do happen; a bridge, for one, plus lots of complex and interesting and beautiful and difficult human interactions. To what extent are we what we do? Do we get to make our own decisions about things like that? While I appreciated the story of Kit and his bridge-building this time, I also really savoured Kit's back-story, which I completely missed last time; it has some wonderfully poignant moments. I loved the affirmation of life and love and choice. I now fully endorse, long after it matters, its inclusion on the Hugo ballot. And I kinda wish it had concluded the collection, because

"The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs of North Park After the Change" does not really compare. It too is poignant, and clever, and the rumination on what might happen if our pets suddenly developed the ability to speak is chilling and pointed and discomfiting. But it's just not on the same level as "The Man Who Bridged the Mist," for me. Maybe I'm just not enough of a pet person.

Overall, this collection cements for me that Kij Johnson is one of the most talented and varied writers of speculative fiction going at the moment. She changes style and genre effortlessly, she pokes fun and makes serious comments on the human condition, and she writes glorious prose. MORE.

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## Lata says

3.5-4 stars. Well-written short story collection. All the stories that I liked:

- 26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss
- Names for Water
- the Horse Raiders
- Dia Chjerman's Tale
- My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire--Exposition on the Flaws in my Wife's Character--The Nature of the Bird--Her Final Disposition
- Chenting, in the Land of the Dead
- The Empress Jingu Fishes
- At the Mouth of the River of Bees (*this one made me cry*)
- The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles (*found on Tor.com*)
- The Man Who Bridged the Mist
- The Evolution of Trickster Stories among the Dogs of North Park after the Change

There were only a few other stories in this collection that didn't affect me as much as the ones above did.

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## Rebecca McNutt says

I always love the bizarre fantasy prose of Kij Johnson (the author who brought us the darkly uncanny story Ponies). *At the Mouth of the River of Bees* is sometimes beautiful, sometimes strange and full of amazing characters and plots that are different each time. I especially loved the author's use of imagery and the almost lyrical tone of some of the stories, and the way each one is brought to life so well.

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## Melki says

While I admire the author's imagination and writing skills, I really only loved one of these stories - **26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss**. The rest, I tolerated. A few, I actively disliked. BUT, most everyone else appears to love this book, so don't let my opinion sway you.

Some of these stories are available free online, so you can try before you buy:

**Ponies** - <http://www.tor.com/2010/11/17/ponies/>

**The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles** - <http://www.tor.com/2009/07/14/the-cat...>

**26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss** - [http://www.kijjohnson.com/26\\_monkeys.htm](http://www.kijjohnson.com/26_monkeys.htm)

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## Ferdy says

### 3.5 stars - Spoilers

This was a bit of an odd read, half of the stories were beautifully written and were utterly engrossing, others were dull despite the lovely prose, and then there were a couple that were just plain bizarre.

-ALSO THE ABYSS. An interesting read, but also somewhat unsatisfying due to the lack of answers at the end. Really enjoyed the carnival setting, the monkeys, and the mystical handing over of the monkey act.

-FOX MAGIC. Surreal and engrossing. Loved the characters, especially the fox, she was deliciously ruthless and cunning. Also, really liked the way the fox magic was described and used.

-NAMES FOR WATER. Didn't think a static-y phone call could be so enthralling and intriguing. The ending with the whole naming of the ocean on another planet after the MC was brill.

-THE BITEY CAT. This one wasn't entertaining at all. It was kind of depressing (and not in a good way) with a bitchy cat and a messed up 3yr old dealing with her parents divorce.

-THE HORSE RAIDERS. I had mixed feelings for this one. The world building was unique and written wonderfully with the n'dau and moving earth, but everything else was kind of rubbish. My biggest issue was with the characters, not one of them reacted in a realistic way. Why wasn't Katia furious at the horse raiders



who murdered her whole family? She only had her ungrateful brat of a niece, Mara, left.. She'd lost everyone and everything else. I know Katia was shell shocked or whatever but she interacted with the horse raiders like they were her friends or something instead of the savages who slaughtered her family. And Huer trying to guilt Katia into helping save his horse and family when he'd just killed her family in cold blood was ridiculous. Katia should have told him to piss right off. Also, why the hell was that Shen guy angry at Katia for upsetting Mara? Mara was upset because her family were dead and it was his people who killed them! What a self-righteous bastard acting all angry at Katia when he was the one at fault. And why would Mara cling to Shen instead of her only remaining family? It didn't make sense.

-DIA CHJERMAN'S TALE. Meh, sci-fi tale about a destroyed planet and its people.

-MY WIFE REINCARNATED AS A SOLITAIRE. Really funny and strangely charming, loved how the thicko husband believed his dead wife turned into a bird when she'd actually just ran off with the vicar.

-SCHRODINGER'S CATHOUSE. Random guy with a box, opens box, this transports him to a room/people that keep changing, and then he has sex with a man/woman. Yea, this was bit too bizarre and nonsensical even for my liking.

-CHENTING, IN THE LAND OF THE DEAD. Predictable, very obvious what would happen to the Scholar and Ah Lien.

-THE EMPRESS JINGU FISHES. Loved the non-linear storytelling and the MC was badass.

-AT THE MOUTH OF THE RIVER OF BEES. Linna compelled to follow a river of bees after a bee sting. The writing and atmosphere was terrific, wasn't impressed with the MC or the story in general though.

-STORY KIT. Nonsensical, messy story about a writer. I didn't get it.

-WOLF TRAPPING. Didn't like this one much, Addie seemed to be insane and obsessed with wolves for no real reason other than it being necessary for the story. There was no insight into her thinking or what made her so crazy about wolves.

-PONIES. Wow, this was a really fucked up story about talking ponies who sparkle and have unicorn horns. I bloody loved it, definitely my favourite, it made up for the more crappier stories.

-THE CAT WHO WALKED A THOUSAND MILES. This was more an adventure sort of story, with a cat travelling to find a new home after hers burns down. It wasn't as profound or unique as others, but I was still really invested in it.. All the way through I was rooting for the cat to find a new home and family.

-SPAR. Just WTF? So fucked up and depressing. but in a can't look away car crash kind of way.

-THE MAN WHO BRIDGED THE MIST. Liked the world and the whole bridge/mist thing. Wasn't impressed with the main character, his personality was quite bland. The other characters were decent though, I really liked Rasali's character, her connection with the mists and her ferrying job was fascinating.

-THE EVOLUTION OF TRICKSTER STORIES. Hated the MC in this, I didn't understand her motivation/the reasons to everything she was doing. There was no insight into her character at all. I did enjoy the talking dogs/pets angle and the effect it had on pet owners/people.

After reading this, I'll definitely be looking into other short story collections.. Even though a few of the stories didn't do much for me, most of them I either absolutely loved or at least appreciated for the well crafted worlds/uniqueness/wonderful writing.

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## Trudi says

The very short and dirty review for this collection could be -- when it is good it is very, very good. But when it is bad it is horrid.

I did not love all these stories equally. In fact, several verged on epic fail for me. Which is not hard to do. I am probably *the worst* reader of short stories. **However**, those that did work sent me into such shuddering, paroxysms of delight there are no words to express my infinite admiration. My favorites worked so exquisitely on a sub-atomic, cellular level that I immediately wanted to catch a red eye to Vegas and marry them no questions asked, no pre-nup, with Elvis Presley looking on curling his lip in approval. Thank you, thank you very much. My five stars is the only way I can think of to reflect that boundless joy. Is it for every story? Absolutely not. But I have no problem letting those five stars stand.

My first introduction to Kij Johnson was in June 2011 when I read her short story Ponies. It tickled something very profound in my imagination and gave a real goose to my pleasure center (at least the part of my brain that perpetually craves dark and disturbed). Funny thing is, I picked up this collection based solely on the cover and title. I didn't even notice that the author is the very same author who had impressed me with her little diddy about prepubescent girls and their pet ponies. When I finally put the two together in an "a-ha, duh" moment, saying I was pleased would be quite an understatement.

Kij Johnson is a bit of a mad scientist in her approach to storytelling. There is folklore, magical realism, science fiction, fantasy, fable, myth and legend. That sounds messy and confusing, and it should be. It should be a disastrous, alchemical experiment that blows the whole meth lab sky high. But somehow she makes it work, each story its own landscape playing by its own rules. She blends things in ways that made me think of how van Gogh saw sunflowers and starry nights. Even where I floundered, and did not appreciate the final destination, her prose ran like silk across the neurons of my brain, stroking them into a blissed out reader high.

Kij Johnson is on my radar. I will most definitely be keeping my eye out for more of her strange and wonderful words.

My two favorite stories of the collection are available online for free:

**Ponies:** If you haven't already, read this weird and deranged tale about youthful female rites of passage and the more brutal realities of fitting in. This is a macabre spin on the innocence lost theme delivered with cutting precision that slices deep.

**26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss:** This one made me laugh with its whimsy and weep with its melancholy. I don't even know how to describe everything it made me feel actually. Aimee becomes the proprietor of 26 monkeys and a series of circus acts. Her biggest trick is that she makes all the monkeys vanish onstage. Where do the monkeys go? She does not know. All Aimee knows is that they return to her a few hours later bearing little trinkets from wherever they have been. The ending? Perfection in eight little words.

Honorable mentions must go to:

**Names for Water** - a phone call from unknown origin that whispers like water. I don't know if everyone will love the resolution here, but it gave me goosebumps.

**Fox Magic** - an Asian-themed fable about love's blindness. A fox falls in love with a man and lures him away from his human life.

**Dia Chjerman's Tale** - short, almost purely science fiction tale with apocalyptic overtones. There is a vibe of dread here that I really grooved on.

**At the Mouth of the River of Bees** - I'm usually not one for magical realism (sometimes I'm not even sure if I'm applying the term correctly), but there's a real dreamy quality to this one that almost hypnotized me. A woman follows a literal river of bees to its mouth. What will be waiting for her when she finally gets there? I'm thinking pet owners (and dog lovers) will find this one especially poignant.

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## **Rachel (Kalanadi) says**

Absolute favorite was the longest story, "The Man Who Bridged the Mist." Want to read a fantastical story about \*builders\* instead of soldiers, \*and\* gender parity? Read that one.

Others I thoroughly enjoyed: "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss", "My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire", "Chenting, in the Land of the Dead", "At the Mouth of the River of Bees", and "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles".

"The Horse Raiders" was also good, but had me screaming mentally at the antagonists until the last page.

Really disliked "Spar" (um...alien sex rape? NO) and apparently I'm the only person who doesn't get the appeal of "Ponies". "Dia Chjerman's Tale" and "Story Kit" were either too weirdly structured or too rape-y for me as well.

But dude... read "The Man Who Bridged the Mist"!!

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## **Sarah says**

I am in awe. Also in tears. Some of these stories are just devastating. The monkeys! The dogs! The ponies! Sob. While a couple of pieces didn't quite connect with me ("My Wife Reincarnated..." and "Story Kit") and a couple connect but make me queasy (here's looking at you, "Ponies" and "Spar"), the rest move me in a way that more than makes up for those.

I've read "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss" numerous times before, and still read it three times again when I started this book. I just love the way it's put together. "Names for Water" and "The Horse Raiders" and "At the Mouth of the River of Bees" and "Wolf Trapping" and "The Man Who Bridged the Mist" and "The Evolution of Trickster Stories" are all masterful works of short fiction. Gorgeous and inventive and heartbreaking all in one.

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## Tamsen says

When I finally closed this book, I sat with the goosebumps for awhile.

It's hard to rate a short story collection five-stars. It's harder still to declare it the best book of 2015. Not every story speaks the same or has the same power. They haunt in different ways. This is true here, but Kij Johnson has done something extraordinary. I don't have words for it - my throat closed a little more with each story. She suffocated me with her story-telling. (I laugh at this sentence - but I shiver too. Nothing extraordinary is free - you pay a bit with your soul.)

I'm breaking these down into star levels - a first for me - it feels necessary:

The 5-stars (in publication order): "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss," "Fox Magic," "The Horse Raiders," "At the Mouth of the River of Bees," "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles," and "The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs of North Park After the Change."

The 4-stars: "Dia Chjerman's Tale," "Chenting, in the Land of the Dead," "Wolf Trapping," "Ponies," and "Spar." Spar is hard to rate four-stars, or any stars at all, but I cringed so forcefully through its 7 pages that I think you have to worship before the altar of the fucked-up.

The 3-stars: "The Bitey Cat," "The Empress Jingu Fishes," and "The Man who Bridged the Mist."

The 2-stars: "Names for Water," "My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire - Exposition on the Flaws in My Wife's Character - The Nature of the Bird - The Possible Causes - Her Final Disposition," "Schrodinger's Cathouse," and "Story Kit" - my very least favorite.

Some lines I liked:

"Because there's always a reason for everything, isn't there? Because if there isn't a reason for even one thing, like how you can get sick, or your husband stops loving you, or people you love die - then there's no reason for anything. So there must be reasons."

"The horses die for another reason, but they die. But life continues... [we] are proof of that. The sun hands where it should in the sky, and I walk beneath it in my right place, n'dau, which never stops moving, which is eventually everywhere."

"She's not sure where she's going or why. Her mind whispers east, toward sunrise... but she knows neither are the real answer. Still, the road feels good. Sam sleeping in the back seat is good."

"Linna stoops to wrap an arm around his ribcage, to feel his warmth and the steady thumping of his heart."

"The river of bees cannot be heard from here, but she feels the humming in her bones, like true love or cancer."

"She smiles as best she can and he returns the smile, as dogs do... Once she dreams of Sam, who smiles at her and dances on young straight legs just out of reach."

"Journeying was a pleasure now, but she knew she was almost ready to stop. She could have made a home anywhere, she realized - strange cats or no cats, farmer or hunter, beside a shrine or behind an inn. It wasn't about the stories or the garden. It was about her."

"Kit... held this close and thought of it sometimes with mingled pride and fear."

"Sometimes we think we want to know what our dogs think. We don't, not really. Someone who watches us with unclouded eyes and sees who we really are is more frightening than a man with a gun."

"We like our slaves mute. We like to imagine they love us and they do. But they are also with us because freedom and security war in each of us, and sometimes security wins out. They love us. But."

"Some people have the strength to love, no matter what. But many of us only learn the limits of our love when they have been breached."

"It is not always fear we run from. Sometimes it is shame."

"... Even loving someone doesn't mean you can share your house and the fine thread of your life, or sleep safely in the same place."

"... How do we forgive ourselves? Mostly we don't. Mostly we pretend to forget."

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## **J.P. says**

It took a long time, but finally here is the first short story collection from Kij Johnson. There are 17 stories, and quite a few of them have won major science fiction awards. I really enjoyed this book. The best part about her writing is there's always an undercurrent of mystery and things are never quite like they seem. Even though a few stories are weaker, there isn't a clunker in the bunch.

The themes of the stories show a wide range of topics. There's a road trip, talking animals, a communication problem with an alien and 26 monkeys. The settings are remarkable while the story highlights the author's vivid imagination, and there's always a sense of the ordinary turned into the extraordinary.

Some authors who put this much creativity into their writing might wind up with a chaotic, rambling tale with good ideas but not much of a story. This is never the case here. The ideas are far-fetched but always firmly rooted in reality with characters struggling to come to grips with the peculiar situation that affects them.

Strongly recommended to all who enjoy science fiction especially those into tales which stretch the limits of imagination without leaving a sense of what the hell did I just read. Gets my vote for the best short story collection I've read this year.

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## **Minyoung Lee says**

I have some extreme mixed feelings about this book, wanting to give it both a five star and a one star at the same time. Will compromise with a three, but that score really does not give it justice to the complicated emotions racing through my head right now.

Let's start with the five star review, I thought the writing was for the most part extremely well done, especially for short stories of such diverse range in subject matter. I almost wanted to write like the author! I was especially surprised with the level of writing regarding her "Japanese themed" stories, which were loosely based on what I presume Japanese legends and folklore. She wrote extremely Asian themed scenery and dialogue with a natural hand that didn't make the story sound like a martial arts film. I was entertained with her tone of talking about the most fantastical occurrences in the most natural way possible. As someone who has a tendency to write a lot about fantastical and non-realistic situations but still want it to sound like a normal, day-to-day story, I thought I finally found my "basis" writer that I could emulate and study.

Now for the one star review, I have to admit, in afterthought, her frequent use of Japan themes do offend me a lot. I am not Japanese, and Japanese culture seems as exotic to me as it would to any Caucasian Kansas lady who decides to write about it, so I would not personally know whether the stories are personally offensive in any way. However, as an Asian, I do know how personally offensive most, if not all, portrayals of "the orient" by writers and artists not part of the culture end up being. No matter how well written in a literally point of view, it is hard to escape the notion that someone from the outside is trying to fetishize a culture that is not their own. At first I almost thought that the author WAS Japanese, some way or another, but after researching her public biography, I am fairly certain she has no ties to the culture whatsoever. So really, what gives her the right to orientalize an entire people's point of view that lasted for several millennia before this lady even started researching about them?

For example, one of her short stories DID personally offend me, and this actually was a Japan themed very fictional short story about a Japanese shaman-empress who would later beget a son who would conquer the ancient Korean nation of Silla. The offensive part was that she chose to use the real ancient Korean nations of Silla and Paekjae in her story and claim a fictional history that the Japanese ruled these nations. To explain myself a bit, the factual history of these ancient nations are a bit of a hot topic amongst the three East Asian countries (China, Korea and Japan) since the boundaries of these nations later roughly become the boundaries of the modern day equivalent to these countries. To claim that the Japanese conquered the historically independent and then technical superior nation of Silla is kind of rubbing salt to the Koreans' still fresh wound of the Japanese invading Korea during the World Wars. Not only that, the the author's language implied that Silla and Paekjae were Chinese nations and not once did she explain that they were Korean.

I was actually so offended by this story located right in the middle of the book, that not only was I not able to enjoy and finish the rest of the book, but decided to write a letter explaining my thoughts to the author. (The author did reply right away trying to explain that she did not mean to offend and not once did she SAY that Silla and Paekjae were Chinese and that SHE was aware that the Japanese never historically conquered Korea during this era even though she chose not to write about it... Well, do most of the readers who read her stories know this? No. Will readers believe every single thing said in a fictional short story? Again, no, but if this is the only piece of writing the reader will read in his or her lifetime about the subject, I'm sure the notion will be pretty much settle. Not saying all fiction should be historical fact, but think about the implications if you chose to use real historical names.) I do not think any modern author would write things like this intentionally to offend and they probably actually really like the East Asian culture if they are willing to write about such things... But again, it proves my point that it is extremely difficult to NOT offend a person of that culture if you are someone from outside of that culture looking in, especially since you are not an actual part of that society and not immersed in the subtle nuances.

I mean, why write about another person's culture and history that you only superficially know about when you have a rich and fulfilling story of your own that cannot be told in the fullest by someone else?

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## Lori says

from publisher

Read 7/24/12 - 7/28/12

4.5 Stars - Highly Recommended to readers who have a little of the animal in them and love stories that will turn them to mush

Pgs: 300

Publisher: Small Beer Press

Release Date: August 14, 2012

The thing with short stories? I wish the ones I liked were longer. Like full-length-novel longer.

At the Mouth of the River of Bees is bursting at the seams with great short stories, most of which I was reluctant to see end. Kij Johnson's quirky characters made their way through their semi-scifi worlds and had me chasing after them, hopeful and enthralled.

The opening story 26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss - a tale about a woman whose world is changed forever when she buys a travelling magic show involving monkeys - is by far one of my favorite (you can read it [here](#)) and sadly one of the shortest.

Magic, incidentally, appears to be the sun around which Johnson's stories orbit. It's the unifying element that's woven throughout each uniquely exquisite piece.

Fox Magic, a dead giveaway by title alone, is about a family of foxes who weave a magical spell around a wealthy man so that he might fall in love with their daughter. In My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire, a man's dying wife seems to transform into a rare, living bird at the moment of her death. Ponies warns about the dangers of attempting to fit in, when a young girl takes her pony to a "cutting out" party to have its wings and horn removed. In The Man Who Bridged the Mist, which is vaguely reminiscent of Stephen King's The Mist, we read about Kit and the strange things that happen during the time it takes for him to build a bridge over a river of mist that contains scary, unspeakable things. And in the final story (another personal favorite), The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs in North Park After the Change, we are introduced to a world where dogs have evolved and can speak and think as humans do and the horrible fate that change brings on.

Things are not always what they seem in this collection. Sometimes Kij lets us in on the secret from the start. We read on, knowing what the protagonist doesn't, slapping our foreheads in disbelief that they can't see what we see. Other times, I get the feeling the joke is on us, that the characters are all in on it and they're just messing with us as they go. Mostly, though, things unravel for us in time with the characters.

I remember cracking this open and reading 26 Monkeys, thinking to myself that if the rest of the stories in this collection were anything like this one, I was going to be mush by the time I got to the end. And then I read the last story, The Evolution of Trickster Stories, and it mushed me, totally and completely.

Were there stories in this collection that felt like filler and fluff? Sure. Were those stories forgotten before I had even finished reading them? Yes. But the ones that hit home really hit home HARD and will blow you away and make Kij Johnson and Small Beer Press people to keep an eye on. I promise.

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## Alan says

There are speculative fiction anthologies and collections—a lot of 'em, actually—that are like bags of potato chips: they're good enough, but what's in them is all one flavor. You can devour one story right after another until you've gone through the whole bag in one sitting, and then it's empty and you're sad and maybe a little nauseated, even, in a pleasurable, stuffed way.

Other books, though, are like boxes of assorted chocolates that you pick and savor one at a time, letting each one melt slowly away in the mouth, and maybe waiting until the next day or even the day after that to eat another, as much to draw out the experience as to keep the flavors from conflicting.

*At the Mouth of the River of Bees* is that latter kind of collection. At least it was for me. As Kij Johnson herself says,

Some stories are not swallowed but sipped, medicines too vile to be taken all at once.  
—"Story Kit," p.137

Though I'd say the stories in this book are *powerful* medicines, not vile at all, sipping is still definitely recommended. I rationed myself to one story a day, or thereabouts, not wanting the experience to end. And every tale was a different confection, with a distinct mood and setting, ranging through straight science fiction to fantasy to horror with a fine defiance for genre boundaries. Johnson does have a predilection for unadventurous character names; "Linna" shows up in a couple of different contexts, for example. But that's a small quibble in the face of the otherwise enormously satisfying diversity of her work.

Take "The Horse Riders," for example. It's a poignant story from the steppes of another planet, hard people living hard and nomadic lives, but with a nifty sfnal setting that is integral to the tale. I also enjoyed the bawdy "Schrödinger's Cathouse," which could have come from Rudy Rucker's pen, and "Empress Jingu," which reminded me of Ted Chiang (one of Johnson's acknowledged muses).

Reading "Wolf Trapping" and then the candy-coated horror of "Ponies" back to back was interesting—neither one is safe for kids! Even more visceral was the impact of "Spar," about a pair of castaways from an interstellar collision who have no choice but to... interpenetrate, let's say. That one reminded me of a Damon Knight story, something like "Stranger Station" (1956), perhaps.

Another long tale, "The Man Who Bridged the Mist," shows that Johnson is capable of sustaining interest at greater lengths as well.

Out of all of these, though, I can see why Johnson chose to make "At the Mouth of the River of Bees" her title story. That one takes a mundane setting—a woman and her old dog in a Subaru, taking one last drive across the Midwest—and turns it into something that I'm tempted to describe as magic realism, were that phrase not already so woefully under- and misused. It's certainly both magical and realistic, though.

The other stories here (no, I'm not going to go through the entire table of contents!) were good as well, each in its own way. There was really only one story that I thought was something of a clunker: "My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire—Exposition on the Flaws in My Wife's Character—The Nature of the Bird—The Possible Causes—Her Final Disposition." Though even this one was sly and pointed, oblivious privilege is



still very hard to make interesting, much less sympathetic. If sympathy was really the goal...

Kij Johnson has been around a lot longer than I'd thought, too. I do remember reading "Fox Magic" (1993) in Asimov's Science Fiction magazine some twenty years ago, and the publication list at the back of the book stretches all the way back to 1989 ("Wolf Trapping"). But it's still to my discredit that it took me so long to really notice her. This is good stuff.

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## Ayundabhuwana says

I'm not a huge fan of short stories, although lately I've been trying to explore short story collections like this one based on other people's recommendations, and I've heard that this is an exceptional one. What I love about this collection is how varied it all is, but how all of them feel like they have the same thread and similar tones to it. I love the deep, dark, somewhat depressing feel of them, and the cold atmosphere you get while reading it, and also the one thread connecting them all, involving animals and their relationship with humans. And even in the shorter stories, I found that I managed to really like the characters and feel the whole vibe of the story.

Some of my favourites are: At the Mouth of the River of Bees, Wolf Trapping, and Ponies. I love the whole magical realism on the first one, and the ending was just perfect. Wolf Trapping was great as well, I love how I could feel the cold and the forest-y atmosphere. And Ponies is probably my favourite, since I love those kind of creepy and heart wrenching stories, and the length is just perfect.

Although some short stories were just forgettable for me, a lot of them stuck a lot to me and in general I really love this collection. Can't wait to read more of Kij's work!

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## Algernon says

**Sometimes we think we want to know what our dogs think. We don't, not really. Someone who watches us with unclouded eyes and sees who we really are is more frightening than a man with a gun. We can fight or flee or avoid the man, but the truth sticks like pine sap.**

Don't be too quick to dismiss genre fiction as escapism. It is a tool in the writer's arsenal that, when properly deployed, can reveal surprising and uncomfortable truths about human nature. It is a method to shake the established conventions of storytelling and of taking the reader outside his or her comfort zones, of exploring new territories, new ideas, new emotions.

*She is fifty miles off the freeway, following hypothetical roads through an empty land in pursuit of something beautiful but impossible and so very dangerous.*

Are you ready to follow Kij Johnson to where dogs look at their masters with judging eyes? To where bees swarm on the scent of despair and loneliness? Can you discover the fox or the cat that lives inside your body and set it free to roam the land? Are you strong enough to cross a river of mist that hides unspeakable monsters ready to devour you? Can you find the key to unlock the equations of life, dissimulated behind a monkey suit or an alien's slimy skin?

*Because there's always a reason for everything, isn't there? Because if there isn't a reason for even one thing, like how you can get sick, or your husband stop loving you, or people love you and die - then there's no reason for anything.*

The stories gathered in this collection have been written over many years, and for all the diversity of genres embraced (fantasy, science-fiction, contemporary paranormal, horror, historical fiction, comedy) they share a common interest in unusual perspective and in recapturing a sense of wonder and a sense of purpose. Many of the titles included here have appeared in speculative fiction anthologies and have been consistently nominated for the most prestigious awards in the field. A quick online search demonstrates that Kij Johnson is one of the most appreciated writers of short fiction:

*She is the winner of the 1994 Theodore Sturgeon Award for "Fox Magic", the 2001 Crawford Award from the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts for best new fantasist, the 2008 World Fantasy Award for "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss", the 2009 Nebula Award for "Spar", the 2010 Nebula (tied) for "Ponies", and the 2012 Nebula and Hugo awards for best novella for "The Man Who Bridged the Mist". She was a finalist for the 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 Hugo Awards; the 2008, 2010 2011, 2012, and 2013 Nebula Awards; and the 2004, 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2013 World Fantasy Awards.*

All her best and award-winning short stories are gathered here, making "**At The Mouth of the River of Bees**" a great choice for getting to know this major talent, and a must have for her fans.

**26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss** : an itinerant carnival act featuring disappearing monkeys provides both an invitation to consider the intelligence and the otherness of our cousins, and a way to deal with the absence of purpose in life.

**Fox Magic** is the first of a series of stories inspired by myths and legends of Medieval Japan / China. A love story with dark undertones. So good that it has been expanded into novel form by the author.

**Names for Water** is a homage paid to Ray Bradbury who has a similar story of sentient nature trying to communicate with humans. Bradbury's winds are malefic, Johnson's water is more benign towards our race.

**The Bitey Cat** is another story of contact between species : a child and its pet, Calvin and Hobbes reinvented, with elements of horror.

**The Horse Raiders** is planetary fantasy, mixing world building on a cosmic scale (seasons following the planet's spin) with hunter/gatherer and shamanism culture. I think it is a good candidate for a novel treatment, with a coming of age, exploration theme.

**Dia Chjerman's Tale** is space opera with feminist flavour. Huge spaceships (Death Stars) impose imperial rule and destroy whole planets that challenge the status quo, killing men and taking women onboard as slaves/breeders. The women survive by keeping the tales of their home planets alive.

**My Wife Reincarnated as a Solitaire** is a wonderful comedy of manners worthy of the pen of Oscar Wilde or of the scandalous wit of Chaucer. The narrator is a misogynistic husbands who finds fault with everything his wife does. He gets what he deserves!

**Schrodinger's Cathouse** is exactly what it says in the title - a divertimento build around the principle of uncertainty.

**Chenting, in the Land of the Dead** is a return to Johnson's favorite historical setting of ancient Japan and to the theme of spiritual dominance over the material world.

**The Empress Jingu Fishes** ditto for the setting, also predestination, freewill, the emancipation of women.

**At the Mouth of the River of Bees** is the title story for a reason. There is beauty and wonder in the world if only we take the trouble to imagine it, and to follow the course of the heart.

**Story Kit** is the post-modernist, metafiction entry in the collection, a look at the woman's condition over the centuries and at the blurring of the line between the autobiographical and the mythical. To the tune of Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman", a writer exorcises her own pain by retelling the ancient stories:

*It has to start somewhere, and it might as well be here.*

*Medeea. Hypsipyle. Ariadne. Tess of the d'Urbervilles. Madame Butterfly. Anna Karenina. Emma Bovary. Ophelia.*

*Dido.*

...

*Some losses are too personal to write about, too searing to face. Easier to distance them in some fashion: zombies or a ghost story. Even Dido may be too direct.*

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*ANGER SHAME DERANGEMENT*

*ALL BETRAYALS ARE THE SAME STORY*

**Wolf Trapping** looks at the outcasts / misfits in society, people whose sensibilities make them the target of bullying or persecution. People who sometimes find their peace among a wilderness as yet untouched by the corrupted hand of civilization. A short but effective alternative to "Into the Wild", that also touches on the recurrent theme of looking at humans through the eyes of the so-called 'beasts'.

**Ponies** is the shortest, but also the most poignant story. A children's tale that is anything but childish, and that evokes again the issues of bullying and of the need to belong.

**The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles** is a companion piece to Fox Magic, also set in Medieval Japan, also told from the perspective of an animal. Epic in the novella form, even better as a novel ("Fudoki")

**Spar** is bizarre and kinky. A woman and an alien are marooned in an escape pod after a galactic crash. Unable to communicate through words, they spend all their time making love, if you can call it that ...

*Perhaps the sex is communication and she just doesn't understand the language yet.*

**The Man Who Bridged the Mist** is the longest story, and my favorite in the list. In a fantasy world, an engineer is sent to build a suspension bridge over a huge river that instead of water carries mist. In the mist there are leviathan fishes, ready to swallow the unwary ferrymen who until now provide the only crossing method. I don't need to explain the metaphor, Paul Simon already did it in music with "Bridge Over Troubled Water". I loved the novella for its melancholic prose that yet includes accurate engineering details, for its awareness of impermanence and for its final message of hope.

*Do you need to tell a Ferry that nothing will last? These cables will fail eventually, these stones will fall - but not the dream of crossing the mist, the dream of connection.*

**The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among the Dogs of North Park After the Change** is the last story, and the one that gave me the opening quote. Our pets are suddenly gifted with the power of Speech and they are judging us, creating their own mythology through storytelling. A less hopeful message than the previous story: I would call it a post-apocalyptic treatment, and an invitation to be more considerate of the environment and of the creatures that share it with us.

My only complaint is that the author is not as prolific as others in the genre. I have already read her two historical novels with animals, and now her short story collection. I want more!

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### **Zoeytron says**

This is a diverse collection of short stories that runs the gamut from beautifully mind-boggling to I-don't-even-know-what-to-say.

The title offering is lovely, touching, and very different. It is the one that will stay with me. "Ponies" tells a disturbing tale of unicorns, rainbows, and mean girls. "Schroedinger's Cathouse" is a variation on the paradox of Schroedinger's cat, employing the use of a much larger box. "The Cat Who Walked a Thousand Miles" is charming, as seen from eyes of a small cat who has been routed from her garden home by fire and must find a new place to live. In "Fox Magic", we are given a bewitching story of a fox who falls in love with a man and beguiles him into joining her kind. And then there is "Spar" - the proverbial spider on the wedding cake. This one seems jarringly out of place even in such a varied anthology.

Not all of the stories worked for me, but the ones that did were more than worth the read.

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### **Lynne King says**

I purchased this book on a whim because the stories mentioned in the "blurb" looked intriguing and I was seduced by the cover.

I thoroughly enjoyed the first story, even though it was zany: "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss". I hadn't realized there were so many species of monkeys. I also like zany books on the whole and had been taken with the first ten or so books in Terry Pratchett's Discworld series.

The second story here, "Fox Magic", I enjoyed to a certain extent, although it was very odd and I was beginning to wonder if I had the right type of mentality for this book.

It was about an unnamed vixen (a fox-maiden in the book) that falls in love with her master, Kaya no Yoshifuji and the fox also feels sorry for his wife, Shikibu. Nevertheless, the fox wants this man and by magic "The magic was hard to make" her grandfather and mother turn her into a maiden: "my hair was as black and smooth as water over slate, and fell past my layered silk robes." The rest of her family also become human.

The vixen contrives to meet Yoshifuji in the woods and he believes everything she says, because we're using fox magic here after all. He finally "mates" with her and then she becomes pregnant. Now what could that possibly mean? Will this be a kit or a baby? It then becomes very confusing with the changes between a fox's body into a human's and vice versa. I found these particular scenes far too confusing and there was also a rather odd ending to that story.

I started to skim read at this time which is always a bad sign. Various stories: "Names for Water", "The Bitey Cat", "The Horse Raiders" I passed over until the final one, "The Evolution of Trickster Stories Among and Dogs of North Park After the Change". Now surely I must enjoy this story? I love dogs but to me there was just a mass of incoherent wording and so I finally abandoned the book.

This is an extraordinary work, very zany and odd but just not for me. That doesn't mean that others won't like it; in fact I'm sure they will.

As for rating it, well really all I can say is that I abandoned it, which is a shame and I had such high expectations for this book. The paradox here though is that the content itself is very interesting but basically I just don't like the writing style.

I see that Kij Johnson's work is already highly acclaimed and that she has received the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award, and the World Fantasy and Nebula Awards, which only goes to show that we have choice in our reading. Different strokes for different folks...

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