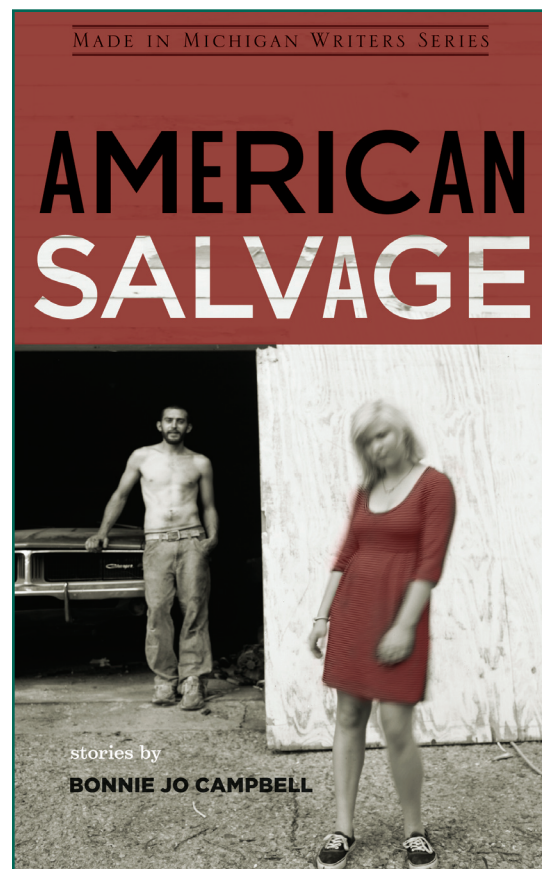


A READER'S GUIDE TO *AMERICAN SALVAGE*

STORIES BY BONNIE JO CAMPBELL



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1. In *World of Gas* and *King Cole's American Salvage*, we meet our protagonists at work. Work also figures largely in the plot, themes, and character development of *The Inventor*, *The Yard Man*, *The Solutions to Brian's Problem*, and *Bringing Belle Home*. How are Campbell's characters defined by their work, on and off the job? Is there more to being a member of the working class than having a certain kind of job? Are working-class characters common in other fiction you've read?

2. In the year 1999, many Americans became greatly concerned that computer glitches were going to wreak havoc on society the moment the year 2000 arrived. Sales of generators and windmills, even seed corn and chickens increased greatly. The stories *World of Gas* and *Fuel for the Millennium* address that time in our recent history from two different points of view. What does the response of various characters to such a scenario tell us about them? What other historical instances of social panic come to mind when you think of Y2K?

3. Many of Campbell's characters have made a habit of drinking and smoking. Addiction to methamphetamine also affects the characters in many of these stories. What purposes might these characters have for seeking altered states of mind? Compare and contrast the characters who use and abuse drugs and alcohol with those who don't. What does your comparison suggest about the nature of addiction?

4. In *King Cole's American Salvage*, a nephew must care for his difficult, damaged uncle. In *The Burn* and *The Inventor*, grown sons continue to struggle for their fathers' approval. In which other stories is the main conflict defined by intergenerational tension? Does Campbell present intergenerational struggles as inevitable, inescapable, potentially healthy, hopeful, or some combination of these characteristics? Based on the evidence in the stories, what do you think will happen in these families after the stories end?

5. Did you find yourself identifying with and/or rooting for any of the romantic relationships described in these stories? Which of the relationships seem to have the

best chance for success? Which seem compromised beyond repair? What particular personal and cultural details make fulfilling relationships so difficult for these characters? Does the marriage in *Boar Taint* seem fundamentally different from the relationships in stories like *The Yard Man* and *Winter Life*? What universal conclusions, if any, can you draw about intimate relationships from these stories?

6. Guns and the threat of gun violence play a role in the stories *Family Reunion*, *The Burn*, and *Falling*. Campbell once said in interview that whether or not a gun appears, it is safe to say that every household in these stories contains a shotgun, rifle, or handgun. How does the prevalence of and access to firearms affect the lives of these characters? How would the plots of stories like *Family Reunion* and *The Inventor* change if guns were not available to their protagonists?

7. Compare the plot structure and characters in *The Trespasser* to the fairy tale *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Compare the quality of the girl's revenge at the end *Family Reunion* to the grisly revenge we find in many fairy tales. Do other stories in the collection contain similar elements of traditional fairy or folk tales in their characters, plot, setting, tone, rhythm, or symbolism? Consider the encounters with animals in *The Yard Man*.

8. Pain plays an important role in the stories *The Burn*, *The Inventor*, and *Storm Warning*. What purposes might the author have for putting her characters through so much physical distress? What is the effect of such distress on the reader? How is physical pain related to emotional pain in these stories? How does the author use irony or humor to soften her characters' most physically and emotionally painful experiences? Where does Campbell's humor come through most effectively?

9. One reviewer has said of *American Salvage*, "Against all odds, salvation counterbalances loss and despair in unexpected ways." Where do you find the most important or powerful instances of salvation in the collection? Which particular elements of plot, character, or language made you choose the moments you did? What do you find most hopeful about Campbell's collection?

10. In several stories, Campbell offers multiple points of view or uses omniscient narration. What effect does it have in *The Trespasser* that we know more about what happened in the cottage than the family who owns it? How well does the roving point of view work in the story *Winter Life*, and what does the story achieve by moving from one person's head to another? In *King Cole's American Salvage*, what do we gain by spending time in the mind of a violent criminal? Do you prefer the narration in the stories that are told in one point of view from start to finish, the stories with multiple points of view, or the stories with omniscient point of view?

11. Money is in short supply for the majority of Campbell's characters, and the need for it is a driving force, especially for the Hunter in *The Inventor*, who considers that at least if he goes to jail, he might get his infected teeth pulled. King Cole, in *King Cole's American Salvage* is the only character who has wads of cash, but it does not protect him. In what ways is King Cole in the same boat as Campbell's other characters? What does money mean for Jill in *Boar Taint*? How is her relationship with money different from that of characters in both *Boar Taint* and other stories?

12. Campbell's characters, while resourceful and creative people, often live anachronistic lives disconnected from technology and other cultural advantages many of us take for granted. Is there evidence in these stories that the characters are capable of coping with the challenges and demands of daily life, work, and love in the twenty-first century? Consider, for example, Jerry in *The Yard Man*, and Johnny and King Cole in *King Cole's American Salvage*. In what way is the snake in *The Yard Man* a symbol of this anachronism?

13. These stories take place in rural communities and small towns. How might the plots of the stories and the lives of the characters change in urban settings?