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## Error and Empathy: A Review of Karin Lin-Greener's Faulty Predictions

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# Error and Empathy: A Review of Karin Lin-Greenberg's *Faulty Predictions*

I didn't know what to expect when I first picked up Karin Lin-Greenberg's collection of short stories, *Faulty Predictions*. As the winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, the collection doubtlessly had literary merit. But the cover—and we all judge books initially by their covers—with its sunny color scheme and playful cursive font, suggested a light summer read, something to flip through beside the pool or on a beach during vacation. This assumption itself was a faulty prediction, as I immediately discovered after reading the first story, “Editorial Decisions,” which deals with social alienation, prejudice, elitism, and suicide, within the walls of a high school. I further understood my error as I continued reading Lin-Greenberg's humorous, resonant, well-crafted stories. As a writer of fiction, I clung to her idiosyncratic, lovably flawed characters, her various and detailed locales, and her inviting prose style. Despite their differences in length, content, and point of view, the stories collected in *Faulty Predictions* all cohere under the thematic umbrella of the collection's title.

*Faulty Predictions* is filled with characters of all backgrounds seeking to control their situations, suppress their emotions, maintain their worldviews, or change their families. They all seem to know what they want until they are met with the very truths they avoid. As I read the collection, I came to realize that my prejudgment of the book was a reflection of a broader human desire to control and the tendency to make superficial assumptions. There is security in being able to predict the outcomes, and having one's expectations thwarted is uncomfortable, but usually illuminating. Just as I quickly became aware of my own mistake in superficially prejudging Lin-Greenberg's collection, her characters come face to face with their own biases as well, and the consequences that follow. In "Late Night with Brad Mack," the son of a late-night TV show host can hardly believe his father's support and sincerity; an older English professor, Pete Peterson, is perplexed by the sight of his own youthful abandon caught on video in "The Local Scrooge"; a disgruntled medical resident in "A Good Brother" instinctively shows deep affection for his sister in a wedding dress shop.

*Faulty Predictions* is as much a presentation of its characters' thwarted prejudices as it is a reflection of our own. In the collection's shortest story, "Bread," the alleged antagonist Lenny, who purposefully squeezes and ruins loaves of bread at grocery stores, turns out to have altruistic motives. Lizzie, Lenny's girlfriend, recognizes Lenny's righteousness. Her Ma, however, does not. She has preconceived notions about Lenny, as we do, and seeing his face plastered all over the local news doesn't warm her up to him any more. Yet in the end, Ma unknowingly benefits from Lenny's behavior. We know, however, thanks to Lizzie's compassionate point of view. This story, though brief, captures the heart of Lin-Greenberg's entire collection; not only does it explore the importance of perspective in determining our prejudices toward one another, it celebrates the little, often unnoticeable things people do to make life better for others.

"Miller Duskman's Mistakes" explores these themes of human predisposition and goodwill in a broader sense. The story is told in the first-person perspective of the nameless owner of the Ladybug Bed and Breakfast, whose deeply rooted understanding of the intimate town of Morningstar, Ohio and its inhabitants allows her a sort of omniscience. This inventive manipulation of point of view allows Lin-Greenberg to explore more of what happens in Morningstar than would be possible if it were a more strictly limited point of view. As a result, the nameless narrator becomes the voice of Morningstar as a whole. When the story's title character moves into town and opens a high-end pizza shop, he is met with disdain. Like an immune system fending off a foreign cell, the people of Morningstar initially try their best to drive Miller out by refusing to buy his food. But they come to realize their reactive behav-

ior ultimately has greater, devastating implications when Avery Swenson, the town's most beloved and promising individual, leaves indefinitely as a result of the mistreatment.

While Lin-Greenberg ends "Miller Duskman's Mistakes" on a darker note than some of her other stories, it is still filled with moments of optimism that are characteristic of her writing. Avery and another younger resident, Caleb Barlow, are always looking to help others, whether it be their neighbors or the birds who fatally fly into Miller's glass building. The humanity with which Lin-Greenberg imbues these characters conveys the vital importance of empathy, which is the remedy for human prejudice: "It might not be kind to say that [Caleb] was slow, but that's the truth. He was the sweetest boy around, gentle, loved animals... He was the first student in the history of Morningstar to never miss a single day of school..." (124). While this assessment of Caleb comes directly from the owner of the Ladybug, it is, again, representative of the whole town's consciousness. Whether or not all the individuals in Morningstar feel this way about Caleb, thanks to the omniscience Lin-Greenberg employs through her narrator, we trust her accuracy, and come to know and admire Caleb as well.

These instances of optimism and empathy are potently found in "Prized Possessions." Lydia Wong, an immigrant from Shanghai, struggles to bond with her filmmaker daughter Anna, who is far removed from her mother's Chinese values. Lin-Greenberg depicts moments of familial tenderness that highlight Lydia's true feelings toward her daughter despite their strained relationship: "Surely Anna had to know that Lydia had only wanted the best for her, always. Yes, she'd been strict when Anna was growing up, but all she wanted was for Anna to grow up to be a proper, well-behaved young lady" (39). These revelations all take place within Lydia's thoughts—they are never stated out loud and never openly discussed between characters. Lin-Greenberg understands that we seldom speak what we actually think, and these repressed sentiments preserve many of our insecurities and faulty predictions about ourselves and others—even our own families.

Indeed, Lin-Greenberg's stories are ultimately about family, and not exclusively biological families. The high school seniors in "Editorial Decisions" become a family through their shared experiences, as do the diverse students of the "Half and Half Club," the collection's final story. The entire town of Morningstar, Ohio collectively raises Avery Swenson after her mother is killed in a truck accident and her father dies in Iraq; Lydia Wong walks "into the warmth of the afternoon to join her family" (49); Pete the professor recognizes "something familiar in the image of himself on the screen," but can't quite accept his role as an affectionate grandfather and human being (73). In the collection's titular story, Hazel Stump, a paranoid elderly woman and self-proclaimed psychic, isn't yet ready to embrace her multiracial family, only

acknowledging them by writing their initials on several chalkboards in a college building. She foresees many things accurately, yet has the greatest trouble facing the most important truths of her life: the futility of her prejudices and a deep affection for her family.

Karin Lin-Greenberg's collection makes us consider our own families and communities, our prejudices and insecurities. To read these stories is to connect to fellow human beings from many places, to understand their individual and universal struggles, and to reinvigorate the inherent human empathy that unites us all. It is also to understand how our faulty predictions about ourselves and those around us ultimately distract us from this unity. Lin-Greenberg, through her poignant, hopeful, and funny stories, offers redemption not only for her characters, but for her readers as well.