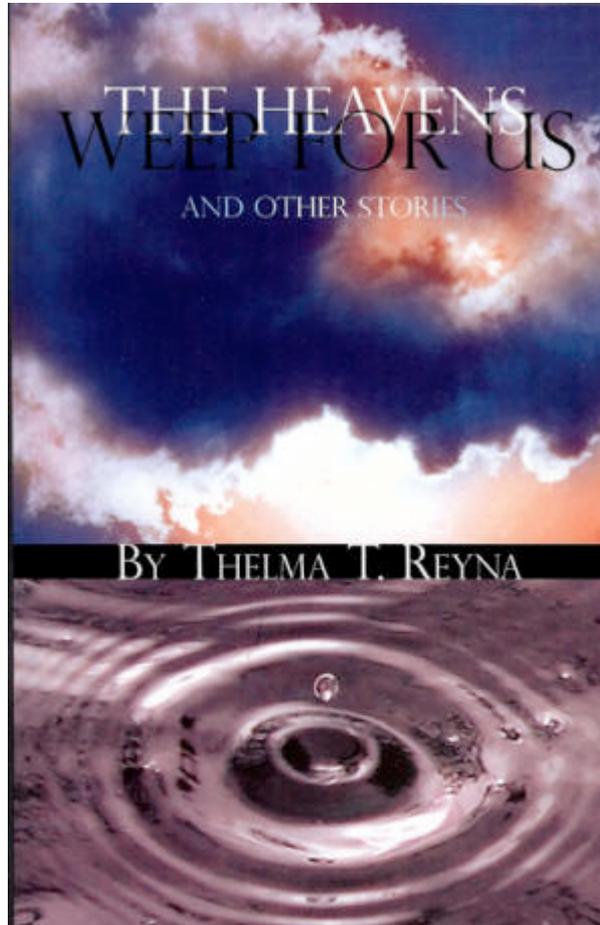


Daniel A. Olivas: Short and sad stories of loss leave reader with something gained

By Daniel A. Olivas / Special to the Times
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"The Heavens Weep for Us and Other Stories" by Thelma T. Reyna (Outskirts Press, \$14.95 paperback)

In her first short-short collection, "The Heavens Weep for Us and Other Stories" (Outskirts Press, \$14.95 paperback), Thelma T. Reyna depicts loss with such understatement and eloquence that the reader has no choice but to go along for the ride.

In "Marry Me," the successful, college-educated Diego must leave wonderful job opportunities in Virginia and return to Laredo where his recently widowed mother has now suffered a heart attack.

As his mother learns to "re invent" herself according to doctor's orders, Diego suddenly finds himself being harassed by the elderly grocery store owner, Kika, who repeatedly asks Diego to marry her. Poor Diego soon becomes the butt of leering jokes, while his mother blossoms into a healthier and happier person.

We eventually learn the impetus for Kika's infatuation with Diego, which is both surprising and heartbreaking.

The story "Little Box" introduces us to Petra, a retired Arizona native visiting her successful attorney daughter, Celeste, in Chicago. Celeste is married to an equally successful businessman, and both have decided to focus on their careers rather than on having children.

But their marriage otherwise appears to be perfect.

While walking her daughter's dog one day, Petra happens upon an empty jewelry box by a trash can: "She picked up the empty box. Yes, that's what she thought it said: Neiman Marcus. The graceful golden script was stamped across the cream-colored satin lining the lid."

Petra hides this almost magical box in Celeste's condo for safekeeping. This innocent act eventually leads to unintended and devastating results for Celeste's relationship. Indeed, despite Petra's belief to the contrary, her daughter's marriage has much in common with the pretty but empty jewelry box.

The title story reads almost like a poem in its imagery, intensity and lyricism as we witness the burial of two children:

"Black umbrellas clump together, edges wavy with dotted water.
Neighbors and brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers meld
together in common pain."

With this short piece (not quite three pages), Reyna demonstrates an assured literary style, one that captures what should be unspeakable loss. But she does, in fact, give voice to such suffering.

Reyna does not abandon all hope for salvation from life's many insults and afflictions. For example, in "Saving Up," a wife recounts the horrible fire that has disfigured her husband, but he remains a vital force in her life despite a painful recovery.

With the 12 stories that make up this collection, Thelma T. Reyna paints a candid and unflinching portrait of what it means to walk this earth and experience both the good and the bad. She offers an urgent voice for those who have survived, or are trying to survive. This is an important, rewarding and ultimately inspiring book.

Daniel A. Olivas is the author of five books including his newest short story collection, "Anywhere but L.A." (Bilingual Press). He shares blogging duties on the Chicano literature site La Bloga (<http://labloga.blogspot.com>). His Web site is www.danielolivas.com and he may be reached at olivasdan@aol.com.