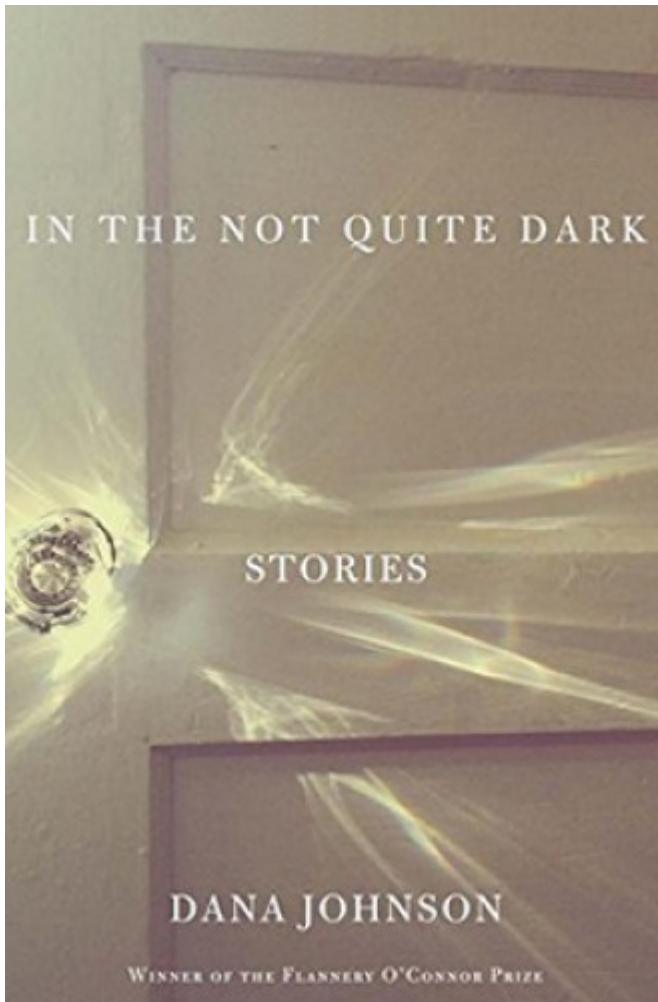


Stories that leave us with questions

In Dana Johnson's new collection, nothing is easy.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue

In Review



In the Not Quite Dark

Stories

By Dana Johnson

Counterpoint

Reading the short stories in Dana Johnson's new collection, I was surprised to find myself repeatedly asking the same question about the characters: What race are they? It's a question I rarely ask of fiction: I generally assume that the characters I read about are white unless I'm told otherwise. When fictional characters are black or Latino or Asian, it's easy for me to see that a particular moment, dialogue, or encounter is about race. But with this book, I found myself wondering if race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are a factor in the narrative—and if so, how large a factor.

In "The Liberace Museum," Heath is a white, wealthy southern man whose home feels to his girlfriend Charlotte like a plantation house where her ancestors might have been slaves. Charlotte comments on the house, saying, "All that are missing are the darkies." Heath, missing the irony, replies that people appreciate the house because it keeps them close to their history. He cannot see what is obvious to readers: that the full history of his house evokes not nostalgia but complex feelings related to slavery and current race relations.

At dinner Charlotte painstakingly works to meet the expectations of her hosts, even "sweeping her braids into a bun so that the Bolingers wouldn't have to puzzle over her hair." She knows that she is expected to "fold into any fabric" and "never call attention to the fact that any work was being done at all. It was automatic, yet exhausting, like a dancer's hundredth performance in a Vegas show." Heath is oblivious to her struggle. "You were great, honey," he later says. "You always make everyone feel so comfortable."

The disparity in their lived experience is clearest when they go out to lunch in Las Vegas. Charlotte is worried that they aren't dressed right, that she isn't right. After requesting a table while Heath parks the car, she waits while group after group is seated before her. She worries that she's not being seated because she's black. Then she worries that she's reading too much into the situation. When Heath enters and the hostess seats them, he says, "The way you carry on sometimes. You walk in, you sit down, honey. It's that easy."

But we know that it's not that easy. Like Charlotte, we're left wondering about the significance of her race. And then we wonder whether we should be wondering about it. I confess I've been slow to understand the dilemma posed by microaggressions, those denigrating or dismissive comments that someone from the

dominant culture makes against someone in a different group. Often the person making such a comment doesn't see it as insulting, and the comment may even be well-intended. But in reading Johnson's stories, I get it. A micro-aggression leaves the recipient wondering, "Would you have said that to me if I were white?" Or a man? Or straight? Or if English were my first language? It's the wondering that causes the damage.

Johnson expertly shows how proximity does not automatically breed understanding or insight. Two people can simultaneously share an experience and have completely different experiences. Most of the stories take place in a gentrifying area of Los Angeles where haves and have-nots, longtime residents and new occupants, run into each other like bumper cars at a carnival. Those who consider themselves liberal often think that if we all just got to know each other, all our troubles with race, age, class, and gender would melt away. Johnson shows that it's not that easy.

In fact, nothing in Johnson's stories is easy. "Because That's Just Easier" tells the story of Frida, Jackson, and their young daughter Dakota, who move from the suburbs to downtown Los Angeles because Jackson wants to live "in the middle of the people." While Jackson commutes to his office in Santa Monica, Frida negotiates daily urban life with Dakota. It's good to live downtown, says Frida's sister from the safety of her college-life bubble. Not only are you near museums and the library, but it's good to see suffering because "it makes us more empathetic."

But Frida knows this is not true. "You could see and then push those images out of your brain almost immediately," she reflects. "But the lingering horror, the terror at seeing people suffer things that no human being should have to suffer alone, so visible and invisible at the same time? In, like, herds. That's what they called them on that show that Jackson liked so much"—a show about zombies. When Dakota stumbles into her parents watching the show one night and comments that the zombies are like the people on the street, Jackson insists on explaining the difference between homeless people and zombies.

It soon becomes clear who the real zombies are. When they go out for ice cream, the family sees a man squatting with his pants around his ankles. Jackson passes by, but Frida stops, shocked by the sight of a man defecating on the sidewalk. As Frida becomes aware that her daughter is seeing what she's seeing, she makes a choice.

At that moment, Frida decided to die, just a little. Turn everything off. She did it for Dakota. She didn't want to scare her. She made her eyes dead, so they looked at nothing. She stopped breathing, so she smelled nothing. Her ears heard nothing. . . . And everyone around her, so many people, the people going to lunch, to work, for coffee, for drinks, had the same look of death in their eyes, looking straight ahead, everyone catching the same thought as they walked past the man. Keep walking. Just keep walking.

On their way home from the ice cream store, the family passes a man lying in the middle of the sidewalk. Dakota asks if he's dead, and when she's assured that he's not, she wants to help him. Jackson explains the complexities of helping: one act of kindness may lead to another and you can't help everyone.

Johnson finishes many of her stories with loose ends, little strings that I want to tug to see what happens. Instead of offering a satisfying finish that lets us push back from the table of her writing satiated, she leaves us wanting more, wrestling with how we finish the story ourselves. Much like Jesus' parables, the point isn't to find a pithy moment of clarity. It's to find ourselves smack in the middle of a dilemma—in the not quite dark—where we can only grope our way out.