

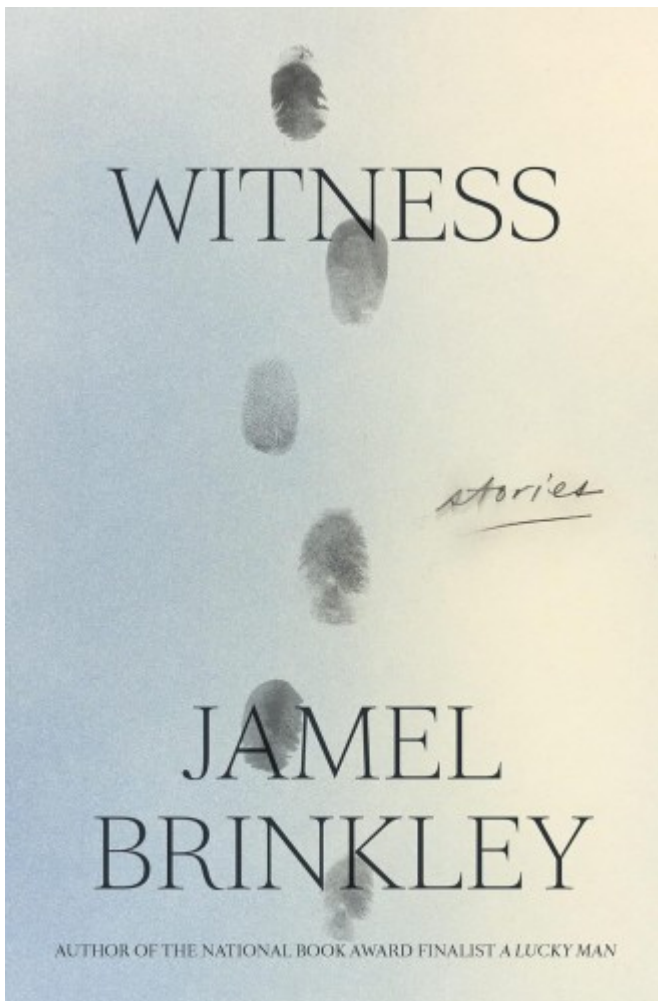
The souls of Jamel Brinkley's stories

Brinkley has a storyteller's gift for revealing characters and the connections between them.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Witness

Stories

By Jamel Brinkley

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

The *Los Angeles Times* asks, “Is Jamel Brinkley the best short-story writer of his generation?” He could be. He teaches fiction at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop; his first story collection, *A Lucky Man*, was a finalist for the National Book Award, and his second, *Witness*, has garnered excellent press. His characters, who are almost always people of color, strike me as quite new.

There is much to admire about the stories of this unified collection, which take place in the changing, often gentrifying outer boroughs of New York City among children of difficult parents. The smell of food from family kitchens wafts in and out of them; music plays upstairs and downstairs. It’s a sensual world in which people dance and are aware of their bodies. The air in the apartments, stuffy with moral dilemmas, waits for Brinkley to open a door or a window at the end of each story.

Binding them all is the resonant title, which of course has several meanings. To witness is to see, to tell or testify, and to exemplify. And each of these meanings has a religious dimension.

The very first character in the very first story is a neighborhood outcast, easily ignored by five young friends. Fascinated with one another, delighted with themselves, they hardly notice anything more in him than strangeness, until they witness his work in a pet shop, where he is treated like a pet himself by the White owner. After a fairly predictable disaster, he and the unnamed narrator introduce themselves, out of our earshot.

The withholding of names, an effective device in the first story, becomes a curious pattern as other characters go unnamed and places unspecified. One woman says, “The neighborhood . . . is called something else now, at least by the white people who moved in a minute ago.” Schools, museums, neighborhoods, and workplaces that New Yorkers might use to identify themselves go unidentified. Brinkley’s characters resist easy typology; he wants us to look more closely for their souls.

And souls they are, every one of them, even if they remain sketchy. Some are spectral—literally ghosts—while others are more truly absences, thumbprints, smudges. In one of the most affecting stories, “Sahar,” a middle-aged woman writes

notes to the obscure young woman who delivers her takeout meals. This deepening friendship exists only in her imagination. After months without seeing her, she notices a story in an outdated newspaper about a group of part-time warehouse workers who were laid off after a wave of influenza tore through the facility:

The article focused mostly on one man who had continued to work while flu-ridden, Harold Anderson. . . . There was a photograph of him with over a dozen others whose names were only briefly mentioned, if at all. As Gloria scanned the image of the laid-off workers, she kept returning to the figures in the back whose faces were somewhat obscured, as though they had been smudged by the swipe of a dirty thumb.

Frightened by “the idea of the ghostly living, of living ghosts,” she finds herself praying for the delivery woman whose name titles the story.

Brinkley has a storyteller’s gift for revealing the connections between characters. In “The Let-Out,” a young man at a gallery party sparks with a magnetic woman—until she reveals that she was once his father’s lover. The parents in “Arrows,” an unfaithful woman and her sightless husband, continue to tease and trouble each other even though she is now a ghost. The story ironically titled “Comfort” lets us feel the deep misery of a woman whose brother has been killed by police. Between drinking bouts, she imagines witnesses at Officer Brody’s trial—and Brody’s wife, who must choose not to see his guilt.

Witness makes an implicit contrast between witness and Whiteness. The latter is a kind of willful blindness, a refusal to see. In the title story, a mother tells her sick daughter, “When it comes to those white doctors, always, *always* exaggerate the pain” to make sure she is seen. But of course she doesn’t, and isn’t.

At times Brinkley’s symbols are a bit on the nose, as in “Bartow Station.” A UPS driver, a Black man attired in brown, dates a Black woman who went to Brown University. When a White man takes them into an underground tunnel for a tour, the Black man’s long-buried grief surfaces.

There’s a tension between the submerged people Brinkley wants us to notice and the author’s own wish to be noticed. He is self-consciously literary, even though his literary heroes—James Baldwin, Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro, William Trevor, Robert Stone—were impeccable masters of clean prose. An editor could have asked why

leaves are “abscised” rather than cut or why a couple lies in bed “awaiting the onset of nightly unconsciousness”—this is showy prose.

A tale wants to be told conversationally, with a fire nearby. If the teller insists on verbal stunts, the story will go off and sit somewhere until it can have the attention. Brinkley wants to be a writer, but at his best he is a teller of tales. In a beautifully simple moment of unforced eloquence, he describes a family visit to a psychiatric hospital and how the residents appear in its artificial lighting: “They raised their hands to welcome us, or nodded their heads to acknowledge us as they passed, and they said hello to us in thick whispers, as though their mouths were lined with felt.”

Brinkley is undoubtedly a talented writer, but this will not be his best book. That will come when he isn’t trying so hard to be the best writer of his generation—when he allows his gift for storytelling to have its way. And it is quite a gift. The full flowering of his talent will be something to witness.