

# ALL I WANT IS WHAT YOU'VE GOT

(stories)

GLEN CHAMBERLAIN



Glen Chamberlain lives in Bozeman, MT where she teaches writing at Montana State University. She has received a Pushcart Prize and the Gilcrease Award for her short fiction and the Rona Jaffe Foundation has named her one of the most promising women writers in the nation. Her previous collection of short stories, *Conjugations Of The Verb To Be*, won a Montana Book Award

*All I Want is What You've Got*

Glen Chamberlain

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Reviewed by Jamie Houghton

Glen Chamberlain's latest short fiction collection, *All I Want is What You've Got*, features twelve deceptively simple yet elegant character sketches inspired by a classical music performance of the Ahn Trio. Exploring universal themes of aging, desire, marriage, death, and wildness, the stories bleed into each other and shift in tone, almost as if the reader is listening to an album.

Like Chamberlain's first collection, *Conjugations of the Verb To Be*, her stories take place in rural Montana and Idaho, and in their own way traverse the remotest of back roads, both geographically and within the human spirit. Although examining the tough, even rock bottom times in her character's lives they are not depressing or in any way dark. Instead, Chamberlain sheds a kind light into the crevices and caverns we humans stumble into as a way to highlight the lengths we'll go to pull ourselves out. Herein lies the beauty of her work.

Although the stories in *All I Want is What You've Got* are viewed through a precise geographical lens, they are broad in voice and point of view. Chamberlain captures the nuances of rural beauty in her descriptive prose, "as the horse wades through the grass, the sunlight catching in the bends of its legs" but this collection's true power lies in her portrayal of the tenuous interpersonal relationships unique to small towns. Chamberlain's version of small town charm is gritty; she gives voice to the secret desires, resentments, and grief that bubble below the surface of the pastoral settings. The reader is privy to each character's secret thoughts, and at times Chamberlain's prose is so intimate it hovers at the edge of discomfort before giving way to a sense of awe at the range of human experience. In the story "Oblivion," I read one of the most beautiful descriptions of death I've ever encountered:

"I imagined his body to be rather like a submarine, sinking, sinking away and down from me, and the ballast was his blood that grew heavier as the oxygen vanished from it. In the ship, still trying to get the steam to flying, the pipes to knocking, the engine to humming, not realizing how hopeless the situation was, how imminent the soft bumping on the bottom, were these cells of his. I imagined them pausing in their work, still only mildly aware that something was terribly awry, and my words sounding big and large, almost celestial to them, because for once Michael wasn't filtering—couldn't filter them."

There is a wonderful surrealness in Chamberlain's writing and she captures the delicate nature of change in small moments that become transformational, how a woman's desire to glue a broken sugar bowl or a young man's ride through sagebrush country can lead to shifts in perception. Her characters' rich inner lives are deeply affected by place, and their landscape is a sensory "world of cottonwood and pine." While some stories

feature the landscape more than others, what binds the collection together is the characters' common dream of wild land and some untamed version of self to match.

In *All I Want is What You've Got* each character has a different dream of the West, and in one story the character reflects, "we came from such different Americas." No matter where you come from, when you pick up *All I Want is What You've Got* prepare to be gracefully swept out of your own personal America into a new place, where the breadth of the human spirit is as awesome as the Montana sky.



