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What Happened Here by Bonnie ZoBell
(Press 53, Winston-Salem, NC) \$17.95

Review by Doug Holder

The North Park section of San Diego, the setting for Bonnie ZoBell's novella and collection of short stories titled: *What Happened Here* is not unlike Somerville, Mass. It is an artsy, offbeat section of the city that like our town (Until gentrification digs its claws in) houses stories about artists, beautiful losers, misfits, teachers, and other eclectic types. But unlike our burg these people live in the shadow of the 1978 airline crash that decimated the city. I noticed that the title *What Happened Here* doesn't have a question mark. This may be true because the denizens of this neck of the woods are painfully aware of their tragic history. In one harrowing passage in the title novella, Lenora, the narrator of the story, tells us about the destruction and carnage:



" A few neighbors who happened to look up when they heard a loud crunching sound and saw the out-of-control jet careening to the right, fire and smoke shooting out from behind before the plane slammed into the earth at 300 miles per hour just behind my house. The explosion was instantaneous—an enormous fireball whooshed into the sky, a mushroom of smoke and debris. Scraps of clothing leaped onto telephone poles, body parts fell on roofs, tray tables scattered across driveways. Airplane seats landed on front lawns, arms and legs descended on patios, and a torso fell through the windshield of a moving vehicle."

Behind this backdrop of tragedy—the small everyday struggles of ordinary folks continue. The neighborhood and its people slowly heal, but the open wound is just beneath the scab. Having worked as a mental health worker at McLean Hospital (Outside of Boston) for the past 30 years or so I admired the way ZoBell portrayed John, Lenora's husband—a manic depressive journalist deeply mired in a clinical funk as he researches the disaster for the newspaper he writes for. ZoBell has Lenora describe the cycling down of her husband with clinical and emotional acuity:

*"... the monster had swallowed my husband whole. He couldn't sleep, concentrate, get food down, remember, or forget. When we went out to dinner, he didn't speak. I dragged him to a play, but he couldn't follow the plot....He kicked one of the dogs. Suddenly he slept thirty-six hours straight...
He took solitary walks around North Park to get his endorphins going. 'It's weird,' he told me when he got back. 'It's like I can't tell the difference between me and the outside world, like the same problems out on the street*

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are going on inside me. A spiraling vessel shrieks to the ground, the trees are burning, fruit sizzles on the branches. Hands are hanging from telephone poles... the smell, faces missing, the earth churning like an earthquake. I can't tell whether I'm awake or in a dream."

Throughout the novella ZoBell has fully fleshed characters in a fully fleshed neighborhood striving to find a modicum of peace.

One of the short stories that I thought was beautifully rendered was "Sea Life." Here we have Sean, a young man newly graduated from college and decidedly adrift. Again with ZoBell's genius for setting, she has her character adrift at sea, on a surfboard, guided spiritually by a school of dolphins. If we are aware—nature signals us all the time—but we have to unplug our earphones, all the complicated wires, and look, listen and feel. And in this story the dolphins seem to signal something about simplicity, and following one's own path. Here Sean describes a mother dolphin and her calf as they follow him and offer him insight and a bigger picture of the world than he can see now with his tunnel vision:

"She glides away, then back—and the calf does, too, in concert. Like any mother in the wild, whenever her calf drifts too close to Sean, she shepherds him away. But then she turns back and clacks and rattles and clicks, making creaking sounds, whistles. Every time her head surfaces and he can't see, she's got that dopey smile on. Guileless. Ridiculous. Sincere. He feels honored, a diplomat to the sea. He knows that this isn't common, that dolphins don't careen up to human beings to visit unless they feel utterly safe. The dolphin must know he's a good person, that he only wants peace. Simplicity, Freedom. He reaches his palms into the liquid velvet, launches himself and his board further away from what he knows, toward the horizon, realizing this dolphin is less menacing than many of the humans he knows."

I think ZoBell is a poet of sorts of her city—the common man and the yin and yang of existence. Highly Recommended.